

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Santa Clara vs Kentucky

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Enterprise Center

## Kentucky Wildcats

## Mark Pope

## Otega Oweh

## Denzel Aberdeen

### Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have with us the University of Kentucky Wildcats student athletes they are the No. 7 seed in the Midwest region. They represent the Southeastern Conference. They will play 10th seed Santa Clara tomorrow. The head coach is Mark Pope. We have with us today Otega Oweh and Denzel Aberdeen.

**Q. Coach the other night decided to have a private watch party for the selection show. You said it was beneficial. What do you like about that move? Are you glad he did it?**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: I think he wanted to be alone and embrace the moment ourselves. Like you said, we all came together. We watched the show. It was fun. It was cool.

Seeing the team we got, Santa Clara, is a very good team. Once we got together and saw who we had, we knew it was time to lock in and it was time to go.

**Q. Hey, guys. You guys have gotten off to some fairly inconsistent starts sometimes. It is critical during these tournament games to get off to a good start. What would you say a good first 4 minutes would look like for the team?**

OTEGA OWEH: I would say we just have to come out and have great energy. We have to try and win by media time-out, 34 minutes we have to try to win those segments. We have keys that we are trying to definitely stay on the whole game. And I feel like in those first 4 minutes we have to make sure we are really attentive to locking in and keying in on those keys to win.



First and foremost, we have to have the most energy and stick to our principles.

**Q. This is for both of you, but we can start with Denzel. You guys have a lot of NCAA Tournament experience. What has your advice been to the younger guys this week?**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Have fun and embrace the moment. It's something everyone wants to be a part of. Something you dream of as a kid.

So take it in, have fun and play hard whenever your position called or your name is called. Really embracing the moment.

OTEGA OWEH: I would say the message is the sense of urgency has to be at an all-time high. It is win or go home. So the details and the urgency we have to have is going to be on another level.

So in these types of situations you are getting every team's best. No one is trying to go home. We have to come out there and have the utmost energy and be really sharp. We don't want to finish the game and say, oh, we should have done this or should have done that.

So the urgency has to be super sharp.

**Q. It's both of your all's last NCAA Tournament runs, what kind of urgency are you playing with this week?**

OTEGA OWEH: Knowing every game could be the last one, want to go out there and have no regrets leave it all on the table -- on the floor, I mean. We just want to go as far as we can. Prolong this run we are trying to go on and have fun in the moment as well, because this is the last time we are going to be able to do this.

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Like he said, knowing it is our last run, trying to make the best of it. Trying to go all of the way. Playing for our teammates, playing for our brothers, every single one of us knows our dream and goal, know what we want to do. We have to go on and strive for it.

**Q. How do you balance the sense of urgency with not**



**trying too hard or not getting too tight about the situation?**

OTEGA OWEH: I would say you just got to, whatever it is, like our definition of urgency is, we have to go out and do it. If we are pressing too hard, I would rather press too hard than not enough.

We have to go out there and be super confident, but like I said, just be urgent. I don't think there would be any negatives or penalties for playing too hard or being in the moment too much. So in these situations you have to be all those things. So however urgent we need to be. That's what we got to do.

**Q. Your identity is something that the team kind of struggled with early in the season. As you head into March now, what is the identity of this group?**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Our identity is to play hard and play for each other. Now it is win or go home. We have to do everything we can to keep going in this tournament. Go as far as we can. We want to win it all.

You will see a lot of us coming out stronger, hitting first, being more physical. That's what we struggled with at the beginning of the season. I think we picked it up as time went on.

Just us being more physical and doing what we have to do to get wins.

OTEGA OWEH: Yeah, I feel like our identity is we are just a relentless group. This season I feel like we have had a lot of ups and downs, and we just never quit. We fought through it all. Could be down 20, we still going to fight and try and win the game. So I feel like that's our identity.

We are definitely trying to limit those slow starts, but regardless of how it goes, we are still going to fight. I feel like that's our identity.

**Q. At some point in the game Santa Clara is going to go on a run. When that's happened in the regular season, can you kind of take us into the huddle and describe what goes on during those periods?**

OTEGA OWEH: We just try and stay really calm, even-keeled. We are trying to discuss how we can stop the run or how we can fix it. That's what basketball is, it is literally a game of runs. Everyone is going to get their chance in the game. We can't get too rattled. That's what our huddles look like.

No one is ever panicking. We have to go out there and fix

it. If we have one half that's not good, we have a whole other half to fix it. That's what it looks like.

We are a really vocal group and try to find ways to fix it instead of hanging our heads.

**Q. For both players, you guys have been around a lot of different players. Start with DA. What makes Otega unique? What makes him a special player? And then the reverse.**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Everybody knows O and what he does. He comes into the game, gives us a constant 20 ball. He's just a bucket getter.

He's not only just that, he plays hard for each other. Defender, great defender. He's always getting the transition steals, leading to dunks. He's a great player. He's strong, fast, quick. Guarding the best guy all of the time. Always getting the bucket.

OTEGA OWEH: Obviously DA, I feel like DA had one of the hardest jobs to do, you know, playing the point guard spot, but still having to be a huge vocal point for us. DA brings that calmness to the group, but he also brings that intensity as well. Like whenever we need him to do what DA does, he steps up. Clutch, going on guards, he's going to score, going to facilitate.

I feel like both of us together, we just really help each other, grow and play at a high level, and anybody want to play with DA because, one, he is selfless. He has to step out of his position to play a different position that is going to help our team and on top of that still super effective.

I have been blessed to play with DA this whole year really.

**Q. How do you feel like the SEC has prepared you to take on a team like Santa Clara?**

OTEGA OWEH: I feel like we have had to play a lot of the best teams in the country. SEC is always one of the best conferences in the country. We have to play physical teams, tall, athletic teams. Nothing we haven't seen before. We just got to impose our will, show that we play these teams every single night and we go out there, and we had a good conference record. So we just got to go out there and show the teams, you know, that we are used to this.

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Like he said, we have seen a lot of different types of teams in the SEC. It is a great conference. Us being able to do what we do, stick to our roots. No matter what type of team we play, we have to be ourselves and guard and be ourselves. Whatever team



you play, it is always going to be uphill.

**Q. What is standing out on Santa Clara's scouting report and film studies so far?**

OTEGA OWEH: They are really a disciplined team I would say. They play for each other. They are really good in transition. They try to get shots up quick. On top of that, they play really good defense.

Kind of like what I said earlier, this is all stuff that we have seen before. We just got to go out there and execute and focus on what we do instead of what they do. Obviously they are a really good team and we just got to go out there and impose our will really.

**Q. Denzel, what does Santa Clara look like to you?**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: I feel like they are a great team as well. Great coach and group of guys. They all play for each other. They get out in transition a lot. They are a really good defending team also. They are very physical. They are going to reach, grab and all of that. We got to take care of the ball on the offensive side. We have to do what we have to do on offense to play for each other and make plays.

**Q. Leadership is so critical during the postseason when it is win or go home. How have both of you seen your roles as leaders on the team kind of change as the season progressed?**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Each and every day, each and every game that we have I am always watching film with coaches, with Otega, I see different things each and every game that we play. Improving more and more each and every game, just trying to see what I got to do better on offensive side and defensive side making plays for teammates.

I feel each game I am building more and more of that leading character. Seeing different things that I try to tell other guys what I see we can do better out there and try to be more of a vocal leader. I feel like each and every game I am trying to improve that, and it is getting better and better each game.

OTEGA OWEH: I think I have grown being more of a vocal guy. I was always a lead-by-example kind of player. Me being one of the older ones, I feel like I got to be more vocal. I have definitely been working on that throughout the season.

And then Coach Pope has done a good job of trusting me and DA to be those leaders, and just giving us the

confidence to lead in our own ways, instead of it being a traditional way.

I will say I have definitely gotten better just being more vocal.

**Q. This is for DA. You were kind of forced into the point guard role especially early. How often was Jaland Lowe in your ear and how has he helped this process?**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: He was in my ear a lot each practice and media timeout. Each practice he tells me what he sees, how I can do better. What the defense is doing, when he is watching he sees everything, than what I see on the court.

Each media timeout he's always in my ear, telling me where to put people in certain positions. He has been great ever since he went down. Thankful to have him. He helped me along the way.

**Q. You just reminded me, what's it like for you guys playing knowing there's someone like Jaland who can't play in this event?**

DENZEL ABERDEEN: He would kill to be in this position. Taking everything I can from him. Him helping us no matter what position he's in, whether it is playing or whether it is trying to be another teammate, great leader for me to do what I have to do out there and help this team.

If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be in this position right now as far as helping my team, being able to do what I can do on the court. He gives me the utmost confidence and helps me out each and every game.

**Q. Before Coach Pope comes out here, can you guys just give us a little heads up on what kind of mood he is in this week?**

OTEGA OWEH: He's in a great mood. This is a great time of the year. Everyone watches March Madness. Everyone wants to be in this position. So he is in a great mood.

When we get on the court, obviously he is going to switch. We are always going to be dialed in, locked in. Sometimes you got to take yourself out of the situation and just be grateful. Coach Pope is very good at that. He's definitely in a good mood.

DENZEL ABERDEEN: He is very excited. Best time of year to play in. He's just telling us each and every time we are at film and stuff to embrace the moment, just to have fun out there. This our chance to prove ourselves and

show what we can for the world, and for Kentucky especially. Us going out there and giving 110%.

**Q. I was going to say what are you guys doing for fun to make sure you are enjoying this experience, taking a little bit of that pressure off?**

OTEGA OWEH: We are watching the games. We know it is a business trip too. We can't have too much fun without getting the job done. Spending time with each other, watching the games. That's fun for us just seeing who wins, seeing who we could possibly match up with.

DENZEL ABERDEEN: I say we are always in the hotel room watching different types of games, seeing who gets in. Seeing different types of teams that are playing now. I feel like we are all gelling through the Tournament. We got a lot of time together watching games, bonding, having fun.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time. You are excused. Best of luck.

The head coach is with us, Mark Pope. We will ask him to make a statement on his team being in the great city of St. Louis.

MARK POPE: Couldn't be more excited to be here, the greatest sporting event in the world in St. Louis. Such a great town. Our guys are excited. The juice around the tournament never fails. The last two nights have been spectacular with what we have seen in the first four in the tournament. We can't wait to take our shot at this starting tomorrow.

**Q. Herb Sendek had a brilliant academic career, couldn't have done anything. Can you imagine someone giving that up to be a basketball coach?**

MARK POPE: He lost his mind. In fact, you know, Coach Pitino would talk about that all of the time with Herb. "I don't know what he was thinking."

He was the first coach at the University of Kentucky to reach out to me in the recruiting process. I fell in love with him in our first phone conversation. He is not just brilliant, he is way too smart to be in this game, but he also is one of the best people you will ever meet. Like he does things the right way. He cares about people. He cares about his program. He cares about doing the right thing. He cares about representing.

He's a kind-hearted, wildly intelligent, devoted coach, and he has been a good friend to me. I love him dearly.

**Q. Mark, this is a two-parter. How much stock do you**

**put in the plus-minus category? And what does it tell you that Mo Dioubate has been plus in ten of the last 13 games?**

MARK POPE: Like all analytics, plus-minus in a general sense is a pretty broad-brush stat. It depends on so many other factors in the game, but it is something. It does tell you at least one slice of the story. You just have to consider it in the context of all of the other things.

There's no surprise to us that Mo Dioubate is a positive plus-minus guy. He brings so much intensity and physicality and brings so much to our team. In a lot of ways he has been the defensive emotional heart and soul of our group. When he's great, we are great almost without fail. He bears a big burden on our team. Lucky he is with us.

**Q. You have talked throughout the year about the importance of handling distractions especially off the court. How do you think the team has done with that and especially as it builds up this week?**

MARK POPE: We have had no shortage of distractions. There is no team with more experience dealing with distractions than the University of Kentucky walking into this conference. I got a lot of confidence in our guys.

**Q. I asked Herb why he went to coaching. Why did you when you are a year short from being a doctor?**

MARK POPE: I watched Coach Sendek doing it. I said well, he is pretty smart. I admire him, so let me follow in his footsteps.

That's not true. This game has a magical pull. This time of year has a magical pull. It just sucks everybody, probably every sports fan in the world just about gets sucked into this thing. It has a power over me. I love it. I love everything about it. I love the chance to be in the locker room. I love a chance to grow a team and face adversity and overcome it. I love the chance to do things people don't think you can do when you don't think you can do them. I love the chance to climb the mountain. All of that is here. All of that culminates at the NCAA Tournament.

For me in a long journey to get back to this game it was pretty clear, it just rings in my heart. It is important. I love it. I love everything about it.

**Q. Mark, there's a lot of conversation about how much rosters are costing these days to build. When that's such a public point and people are talking about it as much does that create pressure to produce or make a deep run when people are talking about how much it**



## **costs to put together one of these teams?**

MARK POPE: I don't know if it creates more pressure. The pressure is ever present. You earn the pressure. Everybody in sports is fighting to earn the pressure. If you have no pressure, it means you are irrelevant.

So the pressure is something we are all chasing. The day that you don't have pressure, it means you are probably just not relevant. It doesn't matter. The pressure is the reward for doing great work.

In terms of the NIL situation, it might add some pressure to it. I think it definitely adds distraction. And it takes on -- I don't want to get sidelined on a commentary about reporting, but I do think there's a chance that accuracy in reporting has taken a massive, massive, massive, insane hit. On a daily basis we read things and shake our head and we are like, man, I wonder if any one actually believes this stuff.

That's probably the biggest distraction it brings. In terms of the pressure, the pressure is ever present and we want it. That's why we come to Kentucky is for it to matter. So we love that part.

## **Q. Mark, you guys have shown to be really efficient up tempo. You have average more fast break points than Santa Clara. Why doesn't it make sense to say we are going as fast as we can?**

MARK POPE: That is our game plan. Thanks for sharing that with the whole world. It is not that much more complicated than that. For us right now there are a lot of slices to that, we want to chase transition as much as we possibly can. We are dealing with offsets we have to manage. Part of that is our roster availability, part of that is positionally where we are. Part of that is our depth. Part of that is -- can be influenced by opponents. There are parts of that.

Yes, we are incredibly efficient in transition. We would love to live there as much as we possibly can. We also have to deal with offsetting issues for sure.

## **Q. Speaking of unusual things reported this week, did Kentucky offer an individual player 7 to \$9 million?**

MARK POPE: I assume I am allowed to answer this question, yes? All of the media people are saying yes.

I can tell you this, I have been in this business a long time. At Kentucky it is just different. The amount of information that is -- I think part of the problem too is that -- I am getting myself in trouble, whatever. This is how we live. I

think part of the reason there has been such blurred lines between all media. I don't think anybody differentiates between social media with someone in their underwear in their basement that has nothing to do, versus the most noted journalist in the world with unbelievable ethics. I think that it all blurs together, and we just start reporting what everybody else is reporting, whether it has any validity or not.

So like I said, on a daily basis, literally a daily basis, in fact, I had this experience with Mitch. Mitch walked in my office two days ago. Right now we are so dug in that I am not really spending a lot of time on reporting, and had a couple stories where I was dumbfounded and befuddled by what was out there and what was being said and reported. I was like, that's the same type of stuff that was said the last week and the week before and the week before.

To BBN I would just say, please don't believe anything you read about anything. If I was going to tell you the percent of stuff that was actually reported accurately, it would probably be in the 5th percentile. It is an interesting time in the world, and that just is what it is.

But there's craziness swirling around, but that's the circus that comes with Kentucky. That's all part of what makes Kentucky so great, what makes it different than anyone else, if anybody wants clicks they can just say any crazy thing or write any crazy thing or click any crazy thing about Kentucky and they are going to get clicks and likes and they are going to get controversy. It is the way we elevate our stature in the media, unfortunately. This is a broad brush. I am not talking about every media member or social media member, which is really not a media member at all.

But there's nobody more surprised about what the head coach at Kentucky has done than the head coach of Kentucky. I am shocked by it every single day.

## **Q. Your time at BYU coincided with Santa Clara's rise under Herb. The times that you have faced off, what are the principles that have to stay sharp from your experience and what in this team sticks out?**

MARK POPE: Herb is so good. He is so fundamental. His guys are smart. They play with an IQ. They have a purpose. If you watch his last -- has he been at Santa Clara maybe a decade. Is that possible? He has really evolved also. This team is way different. The way he employs different principles with his roster, the way this team is extending pressure and tightening the screws in the half court is something that has been a part of him before but he is doing it in such a different way as well. What he is doing with his personnel is a beautiful way.

He is as good as it comes. He is one of the best coaches in the country, one of the best people in the country. I watch him all of the time see what I can steal from him. He is really good.

**Q. Mark, just to circle back here. To clarify would you say that was an inaccurate depiction of the number 7 to 9?**

MARK POPE: You guys are smart. Once you get me commenting, then it makes the story bigger. I would like not to take -- guys, we could go down a list of, you know, we could go down a list of the plane crash that Leeann was in and go down the list of all of the NIL stuff, the list of me being in the hospital a month ago. We can go down the whole list of all of the stuff.

I know that you guys have to come out here with a headline. I am not going to give it to you. But I would appreciate it if it was some segment of the media that is like, let's actually search for like -- I don't know. I am trying not to make a commentary on it. This is all part of the distraction that my team is not a part of. We will try and embrace the circus nature of this and count on some responsible media member somewhere to actually kind of dig in and find out or just be responsible reporting.

**Q. Otega and Denzel Aberdeen's last NCAA Tournament. Otega talked about playing with urgency and how he is encouraging teammates to do the same. What are you seeing from both of them in practice?**

MARK POPE: They are terrific leaders. They are growing every day and leaders. Growth is a step-by-step process. When we look back in hindsight we think that's how they always were. But I am really proud of them for their attempt to keep growing this team and leading. It is awesome.

**Q. I will make sure and change my underwear when I write my next story. The watch party, did you get what you wanted from keeping everybody else away?**

MARK POPE: It was nice. For one moment we shut the circus down and let our team be our team. I think it was really important. I think it was really good for us and really healthy for us. I think it puts us in the best position to kind of have our focus be where we want it to be for this tournament. It was really, really positive.

**Q. Coach, what is it about Collin Chandler this year that has made him step up in those big moments that you guys need a shot whether it be the Tennessee game or Missouri game or when you need a 3? What**

**is it about him that makes him prepare for those moments and you are always ready to turn to him, whereas when he's hitting all of the shots or when he is struggling in know he will get it going in those moments?**

MARK POPE: You watch the progress. Just talking about DA. You think about Denzel Aberdeen, his DPR has jumped almost 700 spots from what his projection was last year. He has been thrust into a new role and he has grown immensely. The growing process has been painful but he was thrust into a spot that we didn't expect him to be in but had to be in.

Same with Collin Chandler. He has been thrown into a spot we didn't expect him to be to have. He has grown so much. Part of the reason he has grown is he has this internal sense of confidence that is just brilliant. And he just is -- he just believes. He believes that he was made for the moment. He is supposed to be in the moment. When you have a player like that, it doesn't guarantee they are going to step up and make the right play all of the time, but he is going to step up and make the play.

He has been so good. We would have to go back and count the crucial game-winning plays he has made. He has been spectacular for him. We expect him to be in the Tournament also.

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