

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Kentucky Wildcats

Mark Pope

Otega Oweh

Brandon Garrison

Mouhamed Dioubate

Media Conference

Kentucky 89, Santa Clara 84

BRANDON GARRISON: We looked each other in the eyes in the huddles and just counted on each other. We wanted this more and stuff. We came out and played with a dogfight and I love these guys.

Q. Otega, you've been saying all season how much this team loves to play together. Can you just kind of take us through that last sequence that kept the season alive with the shot and really all the whole second half and over time, the way you were locked in there.

OTEGA OWEH: Yeah. I feel like that's kind of what happened in those last couple of possessions. We really enjoyed playing with each other and we didn't want the season to end yet.

The game is going to give us a lot of ups and downs and stuff that we can't really control, but we just gotta respond and we just found a way to respond. So we're not done playing yet.

Q. Otega, today you now hold the record for the most amount of points scored by a Kentucky player in just two years. When you hear that what does that mean to you and what do you attribute to the success you've had at Kentucky?

OTEGA OWEH: I mean, that's crazy. Just gotta thank God. I mean He get all the glory because I didn't expect



this to happen at all in these past two years. It's been life changing. It's a testament to the guys that are around me. That wouldn't have happened without them. They get me open. Just having the utmost energy for me and happy whenever I succeed.

That wouldn't have happened without my teammates last year and my teammates this year. So I'm just thankful for them.

Q. Mark, in a game like this that goes back and forth you've had tight games during the course of the season and the team hasn't always responded but can you talk about the composure that they showed today and how much they've come throughout the course of the year?

MARK POPE: Yeah. Of course we're going to the most dramatic play of the game. There were several, but they bang a big-time three with, I don't know, six seconds left, maybe seven seconds left. And one of the things I was really proud of was there was no pause, throw your hands up, feel sorry for yourself reaction from our guys. They scrambled, got the ball and Otega raced down the floor and stopped right in front of me and as he raised up, he said "that's a bucket" and threw it in off the glass.

But that next-play mentality, I think that's something that you talk about all the time but you learn to experience and our guys have a whole bunch of it, man. They have a whole bunch of next plays. So I was proud of that.

BG in the overtime period was just unbelievable as a next-play guy defensively, and Mo is always a next-play guy. So I'm proud of that and I think that's been earned by our guys and we're going to keep rolling with it.

Q. Otega, walk us through kind of what you're thinking, two seconds left that you get the ball coming out of the inbounds. What were you thinking as you went up the court and what shot were you trying to get? Kind of walk us through that whole sequence.

OTEGA OWEH: I was just trying to get the ball out quick and get as close as I can to the goal. I was looking at the clock the whole time. Obviously they hit a three, so we had to hit a three. So I was really just trying to get a shot off



and just not wanting the season to end, just locking in, trying to make the shot.

Q. For everybody except Otega, what's going through your mind when his shot is in the air? Does time freeze? Does it take forever for that ball to go through?

BRANDON GARRISON: It's Otega. He proved that he can make game-winners. When it went up, it looked very good and I just knew it was going in.

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: I was just praying for it to go in. I was about to cry if he missed that shot. (Laughs). Yeah, I was just hoping the shot went in. I didn't want the season to end already. We love being around each other every day. So I was just thinking this can't be the moment where -- once he made it we were so happy.

MARK POPE: I've been really blessed as a coach to watch Otega do this over and over and over again. I don't know what his game-winning shot per year number is, but it's pretty impressive. So.

I was nervous with the trajectory, but then when it hit the glass in exactly the right spot, I'm like, oh, this is beautiful. It's awesome.

Q. Mark, could you kind of expound more on BG and his contributions, just kind of all the court today, and then for Mo and O, when he's playing like that, what kind of energy does he bring that's maybe contagious to the rest of the team out on the floor?

MARK POPE: When BG plays good we win. If you think about bellwethers on our team, when he plays good we win. BG, he just keeps showing up every single day and fighting and fighting and fighting. He was brilliant today. He was brilliant offensively today. He came off the short roll. I thought Mo and BG were unbelievable, out of timeouts, actually running draw-ups. They executed some new things really, really brilliantly.

We've always felt like BG was probably the best switching five man in the country. I mean, really, how many times have we talked about that. And tonight he got a chance to prove it. We talked about it all week that Malachi and him were going to get to prove that they were in very limited elite company in terms of being able to switch one through five. What he did switch one through five down the stretch was unbelievable. His discipline, his stance, his mobility, his ability to contest shots legal was brilliant.

So it was an unbelievable performance by BG. The super happy for him.

OTEGA OWEH: All year long BG has been going through adversity from the beginning of the season, and it was times where he felt down on himself, he wasn't as confident in himself because of the media and the fans. But we knew all along the kind of player he was, and we always believed in him, and the way he played tonight, we're not really surprised because we know what he's capable of doing. And he showed up when we need him and that's the most important thing.

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: Yeah. Coach Pope said it when he's playing good when he's locked in has a high motor, he takes our team to a different level. And I tell BG every game just go out there and have the highest motor. Go block shots. He has six blocks. That's crazy. His game changes when he's locked in that mode and he really takes our team to a different level.

Q. Coach Pope and Otega and Mo, Collin just said in the locker room and Kam reinforced the importance of when you guys went into one of the huddles and Brandon said let's quit switching on the pick-and-pop. He stepped up and said, we can guard one through five. I can take the point guard and had two blocks on the point guard there at the end. How important was for him to have that leadership moment despite the adversity throughout the year?

OTEGA OWEH: Yeah. It was crazy. I think we had a game plan from the beginning of the game. We were all just locked in on that game plan and BG said, let's just switch one through five. He could do it. He could shut down. Because No. 2 was getting hot. He was hitting a lot of threes off the pick-and-roll.

BG just stepped up and made a call and we all backed him for it. And that was a good call and that just shows how BG is super locked in. He's a game changer, and we need that every single game.

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: Yeah. That just shows how good of a defender he is. I knew all along how good of a defender he is, because in practice he'll be guarding with point guards, you know what I'm saying, like Denzel on the switches and stuff. And he can stand his own ground.

So all along I knew what a good defender he was. I play against him every day in practice. So once he said that, that he could switch one through five, we all felt confident about it. And he executed on that.

Q. You mentioned yesterday about the magic pull that this game has and this month has. Is this a perfect example of that? And as a guy who's given his life to

this game emotionally, what's it like to go through something like this?

MARK POPE: I'm happy for our guys. I'm actually going to probably sound terrible. I'm happy for Santa Clara, too, just the fact that they got to be a part of such an epic game, such a dramatic game. It's what you want out of March. And I'm happy for our guys.

These guys keep getting up, man. Like we get knocked down, they keep getting up and they keep getting up and keep getting up. And for it to lead to moments like this where we've had moments like this throughout the year, where guys had to get back up and do it. And so I love it, and the fact that we got to do it in a NCAA Tournament is special.

I don't know where you get this drama. I don't know where you get this transformation of emotions from despair to thrill to despair to thrill in a matter of four seconds. But we got that a bunch tonight, and it's pretty great.

And then even more importantly, the fact that you get to do it with a group of guys that you've worked with, sacrificed with, teased, tormented, consoled, that you do it with that group of guys is special. That's why March Madness is incredible is because you get to do it with this group of guys.

And nobody knows be what these guys have been through except for these guys. They're the only ones in the world that actually know what they're going through. And that forges a unique bond and it's pretty special.

Q. Brandon, Mo and O. Kind of along those same lines you guys have fought adversity so many times this season and kind of take us inside the huddles and overtime. At the very end what were the emotions like that you all were going to extend the season one more game?

BRANDON GARRISON: Like you said we've been through a lot this year and it was like second nature to us. When we bent down and stuff, didn't nobody on the bench or on the floor panic and stuff. We've been through a lot, like I just said, but we fought through it and got the win.

OTEGA OWEH: Yeah, the beginning of the season we got a lot of practice in turning the tide and fixing it. Like I said earlier, in the games there was a lot of ups and downs. That's always going to happen in these games, but we do a good job of communicating in the huddle, not getting too rattled, just try to find ways to fix it.

I think since we had all these ups and downs in the

beginning of the season now it's the perfect time for us because we know how relentless we gotta be and we've been practicing that all season, just never quit, just always fighting.

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: Yeah, I think that got a lot to do with us, a lot of adversity we went through with the losses and come backs. And like I feel like that just helped us right there, because we've been in that predicament before. It's almost like *déjà vu*.

And once we got to overtime, we were like this is it right here. There's no more second chances. We're not going to let them breathe at all. We're going to give it our all. This is our chance right here.

That second chance doesn't come around in March too often. So we gotta take advantage of it, and that's what we did.

Q. O hits that three and the place goes nuts. How do you reset now? The game is not over and you kind of have to do that again for this upcoming game on Sunday.

MARK POPE: Yeah. Actually, it's the same answer I gave you earlier. It's just next-play vibe where it's like, okay, we're here, let's go. Let's move on to the next thing and these guys have metabolized drama really well this year. And that was it. I think they did that throughout the game against a terrific Santa Clara team and then they were able to do it -- we got to the sit-down before the overtime, and everybody was focused. They were just focusing on what they were doing. So credit to our guys.

Q. Mark, Otega had 28 points in the last 25 minutes. You've talked about coaching him, watching him these last two years. Was there a moment in that second half when you could kind of tell that he really found a rhythm within the offense, both scoring and assisting?

MARK POPE: Yeah. Sometimes Otega sneaks up on you. It's really true, which is crazy to say at almost a triple-double 35 points. It's crazy to think that he snuck up on us a little bit. But he's proven -- I've been really blessed to have a chance to coach him. There are moments where if I had longer hair, I might pull it out a little bit. We know that. We've spent a lot of time together.

But this guy just, man, he shows up every single game in only a unique Otega Oweh way. It's just brilliant. I think we're three-quarters of the way through the first half and he got five or six or seven points and it seemed like there was great energy on the floor, and he finished the game the way he does. He's a unique, unique player, man, and he

brings so much, it's really a credit to him.

Q. Otega, when did you know that shot was in and did you call "bank"?

OTEGA OWEH: No. I didn't call "bank." I just got it up out of my hands. It's March. I feel like that's just what happens. It's crazy. I just tried to get the shot up. Obviously tried to make it, but it found its way to the backboard. I'm just glad it went in.

MARK POPE: We have a shooting game at the end of every shoot-around. Otega, have you ever --

OTEGA OWEH: Yes, I have made a couple.

MARK POPE: So he's done this before then.

OTEGA OWEH: Yeah. I've been here before.

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