

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Kentucky vs Iowa State

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Enterprise Center

## Kentucky Wildcats

## Coach Mark Pope

### Media Conference



MARK POPE: I don't know if it's more or less. But I do know, as a player, you're having so much of your own experience, you're sharing it with your brothers, but it's so much of it's your own experience. As a coach, you are spending time trying to mentor every single one of your guys through it. So there might be more breadth in it.

But it's a beautiful thing, I think, as a player and a coach, and I don't know if there's anything that quite compares.

MODERATOR: Coach, a statement on the game with Iowa State tomorrow.

MARK POPE: We're excited to have a shot at playing tomorrow again. This is a terrific team that we get to play. It's going to be a great battle, a big-time win last night. I have known T.J. for a long time. He does an unbelievable job. Should be a great game.

**Q. Mark, it seems like every time you look up, Momcilovic for Iowa State is banging in a three or putting up shots from deep. What would it take to maintain tomorrow and any time an opponent has that kind of a prolific three-point shooter, what are the principles you lean on to try to limit their success?**

MARK POPE: Yeah. He's put up staggering numbers. I think it's close to 250 threes on the season. Shoots 50 percent. It's really, really impressive. Just gotta put him in verified. I don't know where he stands with anybody else in the country. They earn him a lot of shots with their pace. They earn him shots with actions. He earns himself shots by being an elite level screener and a relocator. So it's gotta be a little bit of a team effort. Of course all the guys have match-up assignments, but also the communication needs to be key. Us being solid in ball protection is going to be the key. Us being good on the glass is going to be a key because he's so focused on earning threes off offensive rebounds and off cuts and in transition.

It'll be an individual and a team effort.

**Q. Mark, kind of a broader question. As a player, you reached the pinnacle of March Madness. Now you're coaching. Do you get more satisfaction from coaching in March Madness or playing or what are the differences?**

**Q. Obviously, Otega's shot was huge. It was such a big emotional moment. As a coach, how do you balance letting your team enjoy that and kind of live in the moment a little bit and then prepare for the next game?**

MARK POPE: That's it. That is one of the great challenges of this tournament, right? And so we did it the way we kind of have done this all season long. We had some wide swings this year. And I think our guys are pretty adept at it actually, and so we're here, we finished in media, went back to the hotel, had a nice meal with the guys. Met and did a little debrief on the game yesterday, threw up some graphics and talked about some highlight moments and enjoyed the emotion together. And then it was like it's time to put it to bed because we would prefer for this not to be the end of this journey. We'd actually like it to motivate us to want more, to be greedy. And our guys are good at it. Our team has learned through all of the twists and turns of the season to be pretty good at it, putting away whatever just happened, whether it was great, whether it was not so great and moving on to the next thing. So it hasn't been a really hard process for our team because they've had a lot of experience with that.

**Q. I'm curious, in this era, ADs, donors really have kind of been impatient with the coaches and the shelf life wasn't always the longest. How has that maybe impacted how you roster build or how maybe everybody nationally is kind of roster building and how you look at it because of the way a lot of programs are handling head coaches?**

MARK POPE: Clearly I can't speak for any other program. I don't know if that change has had anything to do with the way we're trying to do it here. Our assignment and expectation is to win at the highest level every single year,



to do everything we can to do that. So we're always thinking long, long-term and we're always very focused on the exact moment that we're in right now. I don't think that those things have changed that at all.

**Q. Coach, do you prepare any differently with the Jefferson injury situation? How does that affect the next 24 hours for your team?**

MARK POPE: Yeah. We'll prepare as if he's playing. You go through this throughout the season where you're kind of prepared for multiple potential opponents. The great thing about Iowa State, and I think what T.J. has done so masterfully at Iowa State is they have such an engrained identity of who they are. Clearly, Jefferson is a massive key to what they do. And so understand, I would -- like he's a special, special player, but Iowa State is going to be Iowa State whoever T.J. rolls out on the court. He could probably go grab five guys from the rec center and give them a week and they would come out there and just be an incredibly intense defensive juggernaut that was finding ways to score in big ways.

So we're preparing for what Iowa State is, and certainly preparing for him being in the game and out of the game, and that's pretty much what we're doing.

**Q. You've spoken throughout the year about the importance of trust in a game like tomorrow where you know it's going to be chaotic and they're going to throw a lot of things at you. What do you trust most about your team?**

MARK POPE: Well, I trust our guys' ability to kind of move on to the next play. That's been a huge staple for us. I think, you know, one of the things that Iowa State does really well is they just make everything hard and frustrating. It's one of the beautiful things that they do, and our guys are pretty good enduring hard and frustrating.

So I have a lot of confidence in the fact that as we go from possession to possession and minute to minute and media timeout to media timeout that our guys will respond and respond and respond again and they won't get bogged down in frustration. It won't make them go sideways. It won't send them in a different direction. They'll just kind of come back and refocus, and I think that gives them a great chance to compete well in the game.

**Q. You talked, and your players did, too, about, I think, in a huddle, Brandon kind of, if not took over, he spoke up and sort of said I'd like to make this change in the way you were handling pick and pops. Like, how does a player from your perspective as a coach kind of earn the right to speak up at that level in the huddle and**

**how often do you want them, once maybe they have that trust, to use their voice and to say I think we should try this sort of adjustment?**

MARK POPE: Yeah. We're pretty much -- I'm a huge believer in the best teams are player-led teams. I'm a huge believer in that. And it's a process. You have to be brave to speak up as a player. One, you have to be -- you have to be really invested, right? And you've gotta be locked in. And you have to be really brave to do it. And then over time, you earn credibility from your teammates to be listened to because that's actually a real thing, too. There's a lot of times we're encouraging our guys to talk, but it's just a question how much the group is willing to listen. It's like any organization that's working.

Brandon, you talk about, he's had really frustrating moments for him, moments that have been personally frustrating for him, but watching him grow even more as a man, even more than how he's growing on the court has been nothing short of astonishing, and I know there's a lot of stuff that people don't see because they just see him on the court, but it's been remarkable to watch him grow. I couldn't be more proud of him.

We either use this game or we get used by this game, and he's using this game right now to help him grow into a really special human being. And so you feel that moments like that where he's like, hey, this is a place where my team needs me to step up, and he's doing it. It's pretty fun to watch.

**Q. Coach, what are the keys to matching the physicality that T.J. Otzelberger's teams tend to play with?**

MARK POPE: I've had a chance to coach teams against T.J.'s teams and they're some of my favorite games. They're relentless, and he's got unbelievable leadership on his team and they got incredible toughness, and I think that stems from his personality as a head coach. He's really engrained that on his guys. So you know, it's going to be a whole-hearted blood, sweat and tears endeavor, and it makes the games really fun.

So I look forward to these games so much. Not because there's anything easy about them, but because they're so hard. They make them really special.

**Q. Mark, I think we're probably about a month into Malachi specifically being like really top line on opponents' scouting reports after that first Florida game, and obviously he's dealing with so much going through all this process, SEC tournament, NCAA as a freshmen for the first time. How have you seen him**

**handle the ups and downs of his performances of late and where do you, I guess, rely on him most to kind of come through for you guys in a big way tomorrow?**

MARK POPE: Malachi, his care is on an elite level. He cares. He cares. He cares about his teammates. He cares about playing great. He cares about winning. He cares about Kentucky. And he cares deeply. And so you see that manifest out. It's actually peaked as you get to the end of the season. And we've talked about how steady he's been and how consistent he's been for a freshman. It's really remarkable. And how vocal he is and how smart he is and what a leader he is, and we're seeing all those things come through.

**Q. Mark, when the guys were out here on the dais, they gave great answers about the importance of staying aggressive. With Iowa State, they're going to make you turn the ball over and it's not so much a matter of avoiding turnovers, but kind of imposing your will. Can you kind of expound on that? I assume that message came from you.**

MARK POPE: Yeah. We're big believers in you want to meet force with force everywhere you can. And it's back to the simple idea of if you're trying to protect the ball, you protect the ball by being more aggressive and more decisive and more forceful rather than actually thinking about protect the ball, right?

When you want to make a play for your teammates, you think about, like, getting downhill and getting to two feet and being vicious more than you do about just making a quick, easy play and a pass. So when you play great teams like this team, it's all about being as aggressive as you can with some intelligence, right? And staying in character. Being aggressive within your own character. And those are kind of high-level concepts without getting into specifics. But in a general sense, it's going to be where this game has gotta be played for us to be successful.

**Q. You talked a little bit about Jefferson, also BG and Malachi. What's the importance of you guys establishing an inside game tomorrow against this team?**

MARK POPE: Well, they make it really difficult because they'll come double team every single post catch. So sets make that complicated. But our guys are elite-level passers, so I think we'll have some play there.

One of the ways you establish an inside presence is on the glass, and they're really physical. So that's just going to be a battle, right, to do that. You impose your will as a rim

protector and taking up space in the lane, moving bodies, and that'll be another battlefield. You know, all those things will be really important for us to find some life in, and I think our guys are prepared to do it.

**Q. Mark, I should ask you a follow-up about playing versus coaching. I assume it's like parenting. It's much more nerve wracking to be the coach?**

MARK POPE: I think when you do it well, I think there's some peace there. I think when you do it well, I think there's some peace. I think when you can find a space where you're really focused, I think the best coaches find a space where they're really focused on the process and not completely weighed down by the outcome. I think that leads to better outcomes. I'll float wildly between the two where I'm consumed with the outcome and some times where I can stay focused on the process.

I actually think when you're doing it right, when you can be really focused on the process and really focused on trying to understand what your guys need in the moment and really dialed in there, I feel like it doesn't feel frantic or overwhelming at all. It feels pretty peaceful and it feels like you're just working towards putting your guys in the best position to play.

I think outside of the court, I think it feels more like a parent. As you're watching your guys try and grow and figure out life, and in our case figure out how to be great men and figure out how to build lives that are meaningful and fulfilling, I think that part feels more like the parenting part where you worry.

**Q. You mentioned process and outcome there and swinging between the two. Why are you vulnerable enough to be able to admit that sometimes you swing more towards being outcome-based instead of processed-based when you also say that the coaches who are most successful focus on process and dive into that more than anything?**

MARK POPE: Because I'm not very smart. Pretty unfiltered. I think, listen, I think the best part of this game gets pretty boring when it doesn't have any way to grow you or teach you, and I think, you know, we talk about this a lot with our local media, but humility, people that are humble are the people that can grow the fastest and grow the most. There's no shame in not being perfect in this game. That's actually being probably pretty authentic and real.

**Q. Obviously, Iowa State has the leading three-point shooter in the country and he is 6'8". Your wings are 6'4", 6'5". What's the key to making him uncomfortable**

## **when he's taller?**

MARK POPE: Yeah. So you have to hit him in a bunch of different ways. You'd like to be there where he doesn't get any rhythm. Like, you'd like to take away his rhythm as much as you can.

One of the things that's probably under-appreciated about him is how physical he is. He owns his line coming off screens, and that's hard to do in this game, especially with how physical the game is right now. But he's gotta be able to maintain his line coming off screens. He gets shoulder to shoulder on screens. So any chance you have to kind of disrupt his flow is going to be really, really important.

Can you play with him a little bit on the carry? He's got this really brilliant kind of dark fade where he likes to play that's really hard to get to. So you just want to be as disruptive as you can. You want to find ways to contest as a second jumper, contest his shots the best you can. You'd like to find ways to attack him on the offensive end a little bit, which is hard to do with this team because they're such a fundamentally team-concepted defense. But anytime you can bring a little bit of discomfort, it'll serve you as well.

**Q. In the locker room, I was talking to some of the players about how you guys haven't played Iowa State yet, but you guys were able to draw kind of a comparison to a team you played last year. How helpful is that comparison?**

MARK POPE: Yeah, it's one of the great things about a season. It just gives you more frames of reference. Our communication improved so much through the season, because now we have experience to match with the words we say and you can point to the experience a player had or a scheme that we faced or a style of play that we faced, and the guys have a little more understanding.

So every game you play adds to that little background of knowledge.

**Q. Mark, when Otega hit that shot, you kind of had your poker face, your next-play face on. Were you able to actually really experience the joy that you know he brought to the entire Big Blue Nation afterwards?**

MARK POPE: Yeah. You know what, that's -- those are things that we'll enjoy later, I think a little bit later. And certainly we enjoy them in the moment. I mean, I certainly enjoyed that thoroughly in the moment. Just we had a lot more business to try and take care of at that moment. But that's our job is to be very focused on kind of what's next, like what are we going to do next? What are we going to do next? And as a team and as a coaching staff, we're

sometimes more successful or less successful than that. But when you have emotional swings like that, I think your team needs a little bit of a steadying force. I think it's really important. I think it's really, really important to move on to the next thing.

I probably enjoyed that moment more deeply than maybe only a handful of people. But it was also on to the next thing. They're both true.

MODERATOR: Mark, time is up for this session. Appreciate your time. Good luck tomorrow.

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