

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

Sunday, March 22, 2026

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Kentucky Wildcats

Mark Pope

Otega Oweh

Denzel Aberdeen

Media Conference



thank you to BBN the past two years, it's been amazing. Thank you Coach Pope for bringing me in. We fell short this year, but I'm sure the guys next year are going to come and remember this and get the job done, because playing here at Kentucky, that's what the fans and everyone deserves is to win.

Obviously I'm disappointed that we didn't get it done this year, but these past two years have been amazing, life changing. I'm just thankful for my teammates that I played with last year, this year. I'll definitely never forget it for sure.

Q. Mark, a bucket away from y'all being up two at the half. What changed in the second for y'all?

MARK POPE: Well, we got a little disoriented at the last eight or ten minutes of the first half and that's what Iowa State does, they increase their pressure and we turned it over 12 times in the first half, and kind of contributed to our own demise. Credit to them.

And then their defense ratcheted up in the second half and we had a tough time finding baskets. More importantly, we had a really tough time getting a stop. They shot it well in the second half. They executed well in the second half.

They shot 50 percent in the second half from three, and they played really well.

You're not going to win games when you give up 51 in the second half, and there are a lot of reasons why that happened. We just couldn't quite stem the tide there.

Q. Coach, that \$22 million number that was pinned to you guys at the beginning of the year, did you see that affect the group at all? I know you guys had big injuries, but did you learn anything from a resource allocation standpoint from the season?

MARK POPE: Well, we've heard so many numbers go around that it's -- it just is -- we live in a really interesting world.

I think we were disappointed that we never got to run with the roster that we thought we had. These guys did an amazing job adjusting. You think about DA came here with

Iowa State 82, Kentucky 63

MARK POPE: In regards to the game, I thought Iowa State was terrific. They exert a ton of pressure. They're very disruptive, and certainly they were disruptive with us. They played hard and they played well. They're a good team, and they earned a 2 seed. They did it shorthanded, so congratulations to them.

For us, I'm really proud of our guys. These guys took on a character this year of just dealing with a ton and just trying to stand back up and stand back up and stand back up, and if we were blessed to have another game, I'm sure they would again. We just weren't good enough tonight.

Q. For both Otega and Denzel, the final game of your collegiate career. With Kentucky, what's your final message overall if you can reflect on your experience as a Wildcat?

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Yeah, first and foremost, I want to thank BBN, Coach Mark Pope, my guys, Otega, all my teammates for allowing me to step foot at the University of Kentucky. Ever since I stepped foot on campus they welcomed me with warm hugs, everybody was positive with me, everybody was basically like family to me, so I want to thank them.

We didn't get to where we wanted to get to today, but I'm proud of each and every one of my teammates, my coaches, BBN for just allowing me to be here and I'm forever grateful for them.

OTEGA OWEH: Kind of the same thing I want to say



one responsibility in mind and one framework for a team, and had to transition through the whole course of the year to be a player that he did not come here to be, and that goes with a lot of guys on our team.

We didn't get to play the way that we planned to. We didn't get to play with the personnel we planned to. All of that changed, and I think our guys raised up and they made the very, very best of a complicated difficult situation roster-wise and health-wise, and I couldn't be more proud of them.

Their response has been incredible. We didn't get to do anything the way we had planned or constructed just because of health situations. But these guys still left us with unbelievable moments and memories, if not getting to the ultimate goal.

Q. Coach, Iowa State's defense, we all know about, what's their secret sauce? Because you kind of know what's coming. What makes them be able to thrive the way they do?

MARK POPE: Well, they're unique in the fact of how they push up the boards. They really do -- it's a real credit to TJ and a real credit to his team. I'm not totally convinced -- they have a couple world-class defenders on that team. But that roster is not made up of defensive specialists aside from maybe a couple guys.

But their team concept is really good and they hide a lot of it by being overaggressive and putting you in compromising positions and getting you sped up, and it certainly showed that tonight.

Q. You said you didn't get to play how you planned to play. What was the overall big picture? What did you want the plan to look like this year and kind of what do you want it to look like going forward as far as your roster and style of play?

MARK POPE: Well, we thought we were going to have depth and physicality and size, and we felt like we were going to be able to come wave after wave after wave. We knew going in that we were a little bit light at the point guard position just because of changes that happened in the roster late in the spring last year. So that was the one place we had some nervousness.

Those worries came true, certainly with all that said, D.A. did an unbelievable job, like, an incredible job of growing into a high-IQ, run-the-team, lift-up-the-guys, make-the-thing-function. So that was problematic.

What we ended up with was playing a shorter rotation with

guys out of position and guys learning new roles, and our guys were incredible.

Like I said, it's clearly not the outcome we're looking for, but under the circumstances with guys playing out of position under that duress, I was really proud of how they did it.

Q. For Otega and Denzel, starting towards that back last half of conference play and going into today, what was the biggest thing that kept you from being more successful than y'all ended up being this season?

OTEGA OWEH: You know, I think we just -- at the end of conference, we were really just focused on trying to stack some positive energy going into the Tournament. Also we wished we could win every single game, but that's not how basketball works every time.

For us, we were really just focused on getting better every single game, trying to start off the games better, and I feel like we did a good job of that actually towards the end of the conference and even going into the Tournament.

We just didn't do a good job of doing it for a full 40, but you live and you learn. I feel like the group next year obviously is going to do a good job of responding and remembering this moment and just building off of that.

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Kind of like he said, we didn't play fully hard for the full 40 minutes, and we had to do a better job. I feel like for the most part we tried to turn it around as much as possible every single game. I felt like we were improving and we've got to do it for a full 40.

Whoever comes in next year, I feel like they're going to make a huge change, they're going to make a huge change for Kentucky. Whoever comes in, I hope they just take it on, play fully hard for 40 minutes. They're going to get it done, though.

Q. Outside of those two guys sitting next to you, everybody is eligible to come back. In this day of complete roster turnovers, where do you start going forward?

MARK POPE: Well, retention is a big part of this, and we have good young players. You think about you're starting a first-year center and a first-year power forward and a sophomore 2 guard. It wasn't the plan coming into the season, but it's what we ended up with, and those guys have gained some great experience and they're going to get better and better and better. We'll start there and kind of build out from there. We've done this for two years, and we'll continue to do a good job at it.



Q. I know a big part of your mindset when recruiting is players understanding what it means to wear "Kentucky" across their chest. Do you feel like looking towards the future as NIL and the transfer portal get more and more big and crazy that it's going to be harder to find guys who understand the loyalty and kind of what it means to play for a school rather than just going where the money is, or do you think you're still going to be able to find guys who are willing to commit to Kentucky for the extent of their career and the full amount of loyalty that you played with as a player?

MARK POPE: I think our focus is finding guys that want to be at Kentucky because of what Kentucky is. This is the greatest place in the world to play basketball. It comes with all of the stuff. It comes with all the pressure and the scrutiny.

These guys won games in the NCAA Tournament back-to-back years, and at any other school, that would be good, and at Kentucky, the uniqueness of Kentucky, that's not the answer.

Finding guys that want that, and we can find them. There's great guys. You think about these two guys up here, Otega put together one of the epic two-year careers in the history of Kentucky basketball, and Denzel came in here and had to play a completely different position than he's ever played before under different circumstances, and rose up and actually put together a great year.

We'll find the guys. There's no place like this. But it's got to be the right fit for guys, and they've got to want it. At the end of the day, it'll be all those things are important. Of course all those things are important, fit, opportunity, NIL, potential for future growth, all those things are important.

But it's Kentucky; there's nowhere like it, so it's not hard to find guys.

Q. You talked earlier about the injuries kind of preventing you from playing the way you envisioned. Have you had a single time where you've put out the team you thought you were going to have in your head?

MARK POPE: No, but -- that's not true. We did early in the season last year. We did this year. We had -- I was thinking the St. John's, the second half when we ended up magically J Lowe came back from getting semi-dislocated in the first half and played those 17 minutes in the second half. But that wasn't really a look because J Lowe never got to practice with our team and JQ never got to practice

with our team, even when we were trying to rolling them out for a couple games. So we never really got to know each other that way.

But listen, it's certainly made our job more complicated. It's made D.A.'s life for complicated, Otega's life more complicated, made Collin's life more complicated, made Jasper's life way more complicated than it should have been, made BG and Malachi's life more complicated but that's also part of what we do.

I'm proud of these guys, man. These guys gave us everything that they could give us. They didn't give us everything, but they gave us everything that they could give us, and that's something. They grew close together through great times and through moments of adversity the entire year.

Otega Oweh, not only put incredible put performances on the court that BBN will remember forever, but he also grew as a man and grew as a leader in his own way. And Denzel Aberdeen brought so much joy to this place every single day with a unique competitive spirit and a willingness to try and learn how to do things way different at a different position than he'd done them before.

I love these guys, man. It's hard for me to think much past that.

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