

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday, July 17, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Alex Afari Jr.

Press Conference



ALEX AFARI JR: I'm just blessed to be here. I thank God for letting me have this opportunity to be here and representing the University of Kentucky.

Q. The SEC attracts a lot of different people. You have an interesting background. Why don't you share that with us.

ALEX AFARI JR: I was originally born in Italy. Then later, after four years -- my parents are originally from Ghana. They moved to Ghana for about four years. I played real football over there.

And then came to the United States and I wanted to continue playing real football. My neighbor was Kaleb Johnson, he's a rookie running back for the Steelers. His grandpa signed me up for football.

First day of practice, they put a helmet on me and some shoulder pads. I said, this is not what I signed up for. But he didn't let me quit. He let me stay with it. Just blessed to be here now.

Q. How old were you when you first started playing?

ALEX AFARI JR: I was 8 years old.

Q. So you were a natural right off the bat?

ALEX AFARI JR: I wouldn't say natural. I started really becoming good at football in seventh grade. It took me some time.

Q. Did you know much about the rules, or did you have to learn those on the fly?

ALEX AFARI JR: I just learned off the fly. Kaleb Johnson's grandpa brought me to the football field every day with him. We were just practicing out in the backyard.

Q. When you first started following teams, who did

you follow in college and the pros?

ALEX AFARI JR: In college, I feel like every kid followed Oregon. I just liked the uniforms. I liked them.

The NFL, AJ Peterson was my favorite player. The Vikings, that's who I was following.

Q. Tell me about the transition from DB to linebacker. How is that process going for you?

ALEX AFARI JR: It's going great. I'm closer to the ball. I can make more plays when I'm closer to the ball. It was a great transition. And I feel like this is the year for me. Put on some weight. I'm at 230 now. I feel good about this year.

Q. In terms of keys, what do you look at? How big of a difference is it from DB to linebacker?

ALEX AFARI JR: It's a big difference because at DB, you don't really focus too much on O linemen. You go at as receivers. Being in the box, it's a big difference seeing guard pulls and misdirections and getting everybody on the same page.

Q. Zach Calzada joined the team this offseason. He's been around the conference, couple other schools, played a lot of college football. Your impressions of Zach on and off the field?

ALEX AFARI JR: He's a great person off the field. He is really doing a good job winning the locker room over. He can take control in the huddle with the offense as well. And he has a big arm. I feel like he's really slept on. And people will see it this year.

Q. Your coach is the longest-tenured coach in the conference. What's it like playing for Coach Stoops?

ALEX AFARI JR: It's amazing. He's a player-led coach, a real loyal guy. I'm just blessed to be able to play for him. I just want to be loyal to him.

Q. This is the first time in a long time at Kentucky that



the back four is more experienced and there are fewer question marks than the front seven. Of course, you're a linebacker now but you've been a part of both. What's it been like assimilating with guys who might have been backups or transfers that are going to get more playing time up front, and how do you feel about them?

ALEX AFARI JR: I feel great. The coaches did a really good job recruiting and bringing the right people to Kentucky. I feel like they played a lot of football. Have a lot of experience. I feel like they're going to be good for us. I'm excited about that.

Q. What's your favorite rivalry? Fans have them for each school. What is your favorite rival?

ALEX AFARI JR: Louisville.

Q. Why so?

ALEX AFARI JR: We don't like 'em. (Laughter).

Q. I know Mark Stoops loves it when his team can play with a chip on its shoulder. That's especially relevant now coming off last year. What's the mindset been like in the building and workouts?

ALEX AFARI JR: We know what happened last year. We addressed it. We're going to grow from it. We're going to play with a chip on our shoulder. Makes us more hungry this year to prove everybody wrong, seeing everybody putting us last in the SEC.

We have a chip on our shoulder and ready to prove people wrong.

Q. You finished last year third on your team in tackles with 62. What have you worked on during the offseason to not only improve your game but bring success this season?

ALEX AFARI JR: First of all, I got stronger in the weight room. I got way stronger, way more explosive. I feel it's going to translate on the field.

I feel like the strength coach has done a great job with all our players, changing our bodies, making us stronger and more explosive and faster.

Q. Who is somebody on the Kentucky front seven people may not know about right now but you think by the end of the season could break through?

ALEX AFARI JR: I like all the players in our D line room. I

like Mi'Quise Grace. He's going to be real good for us. Devon Gusta, I feel he's going to be real good for us. Jaden Williams, I feel he's going to be good. And just the returning players, Saunders is going to be good. And I feel real good about our front seven and our linebackers as well, too.

Q. From a food perspective, from Italy to Ghana to Kentucky, how does it compare? What's your favorite dish?

ALEX AFARI JR: I would say my favorite dish would be jollof rice. My mom makes jollof rice, it's an African dish, from Ghana. That's my favorite food.

Q. Find it in Kentucky?

ALEX AFARI JR: Not as good as my mom's.

Q. How about the different climates you've lived in? How is the climate in Lexington compared to others?

ALEX AFARI JR: It's not even close to Ghana. It's real hot in Ghana. It stays hot the whole year. It's not even close in Ghana.

Q. You mentioned playing a different kind of football growing up. You still kick the ball around a little bit, do you find time to do that? Are you too busy?

ALEX AFARI JR: No, I'm too busy right now. I don't really play soccer. I used to when I was younger, I used to play at recess during elementary grade, but I ain't really pick it up.

Q. When you first started following football, was it tough to follow the scoring system, how teams got points?

ALEX AFARI JR: It was difficult, it was something that I had to adjust to. Took me a while to understand all the rules that go into football. I think by my eighth grade, seventh grade year, that's when I truly understood everything that comes with football.

Q. What rule made the least amount of sense growing up? You had to learn a new game. What was strange?

ALEX AFARI JR: I'd probably say like the field goals. Some is worth three points, then one point. I was, like, why can't it all just be worth one? I feel like that's something that I had to get used to.

Q. You've been on this team for a couple years now. What specifically is different about the makeup of this

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

year's roster?

ALEX AFARI JR: I feel like we've grown as a team. I feel like this is the closest our team has ever been since I've been here. I truly feel that way. I feel like once we all know each other on a personal level, I feel like if you really know your brothers, during game days, you want to fight a little harder for them.

Q. Is there a particular SEC road site that you enjoy going to play at?

ALEX AFARI JR: I like Ole Miss. Ole Miss and Tennessee. They've got good fans. I like Tennessee. Tennessee is fun to play at.

Q. Ole Miss, it was a great win last year, obviously. You played so well against Georgia. Then things kind of fell off the cliff. What was going on then that worked so well that you guys can carry into this year? I know you don't spend a lot of time dwelling, but what did you learn from those efforts that you can use this coming season?

ALEX AFARI JR: Just finishing games. Finishing in general. We will start off great then by the fourth quarter we're not the same as the first quarter. We've just got to be able to finish out games and finish out each quarter, take it quarter by quarter and just finish out games.

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