

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Mark Pope

Men's Media Day Press Conference



Q. You guys obviously have been together on the court for about four months now, a less than three weeks until the opener. What's the biggest challenge, or where do you want to see more improvement in a specific area before then?

MARK POPE: Yeah, so we're blessed to have a really veteran group that's got a ton of experience, that's got no experience with each other. It's been since the very, very first day that we were together, it's been a major piece of focus for our guys to understand us and understand each other and try and fit together and communicate with each other. So that's been the biggest part for us.

We have guys that bring in exactly the skill sets that we're looking for in this first year, and it's just a matter of us growing together. That's something that we've done extraordinarily well, I think, over the course of the summer. I've been really proud of our guys and into the fall and into Banner Camp.

The next thing for us is actually to get on a court and play against somebody else and start coming together that way, too. So I think we're well on our way in the process, and we're excited for the next steps.

Q. I covered Jaxson Robinson at Arkansas it seems like about a million years ago. I know he's older and he's more developed. What kind of player is he, and why is he the kind of guy you wanted to bring to Kentucky? And I've seen photos and videos of you and Cal on the recruiting trail. How would you describe y'all's relationship? He's staying in the league but you're replacing him. What do you think about that dynamic?

MARK POPE: Yeah, I could talk about Jax for days. I've been blessed to coach him now going on my third season coaching him. And one of the great things in coaching is

getting to watch young men just grow, and Jax came to us as a two-time transfer with a ton of potential that was unrealized with maybe some battle scars from some difficult times that we all have, that we all go through as we're trying to grow into players.

To watch him become an extraordinary leader, to grow into that, to become a guy that is constantly reaching out to players on his team to build relationships, to see him increase his intensity level with the physicality of the game and the intensity of the game and to really, really embrace that, to see him grow into a player that kind of faces every situation with a level of fearlessness.

And clearly his ability to shoot the ball and his length, he's a multifaceted player, and it's a real gift for me as a first-year head coach at the University of Kentucky to have a veteran, veteran, and seasoned, extraordinarily talented player like Jaxson who's grown into a terrific leader.

So I'm incredibly grateful to be able to coach him one more year. And on a personal level, to finish this journey that we got to start three years ago is really exciting for me.

You'll never hear me say a negative work about Coach Cal because there's not a lot to say to. He's a Hall of Fame coach. As a die-hard Kentucky fan and alumnus and former player, I am grateful for everything, all the incredible things that Cal accomplished at the University of Kentucky.

And he's also been a good friend. He's been a terrific mentor, and he's always been generous to Lee Anne and I as we've gone through our coaching journey. So we wish him the best in everything that he does, and I will forever be grateful for everything that he did at Kentucky. And we'll be cheering for him every day like crazy except for February 1st.

Q. Big Blue Madness, Rick Pitino comes back, obviously that was a big moment. What did all that mean for you to have him there and then just the celebration you enjoyed this weekend?

MARK POPE: Yeah, Coach Pitino is really personal to me. If you think about your life, you count on one hand maybe



the people that really, really, really change you forever, and I love Coach Pitino for that.

I'll be forever grateful for him. He changed the way that I see the world, and he changed the way that I walk into a room, and he changed the confidence that we approach challenges with. And on top of all that, we got to share as a team under his leadership just the most extraordinary of extraordinary experiences together.

He is a coach that also is on the Mount Rushmore of Kentucky basketball coaches, and that's really saying something. He took a program when it was in a really, really, really difficult spot and took it to back where it belongs, at the top of the college basketball mountain, and he did it with all of his style and intensity and everything that he brings to the game.

I love him so much, and it was really special for him to be able to walk into Rupp Arena and feel that from BBN, to feel their gratitude. We talk about gratitude every single day on our team. It's a really important part of what we do. For Coach to be able to feel the gratitude of BBN for him I thought was really special.

Q. Your last week at the team media day in Lexington you were asked your philosophy on starting lineups and stuff like that. You've mentioned for us, finishing the game is more important than maybe who's in the starting lineup.

In terms of at the end of games, do you feel like there's an importance in identifying a go-to guy or one or two guys in these late-game situations, or do you feel like that allows opponents to predicate too much on one guy and you want to have five guys out there who potentially could take a game-winning shot?

MARK POPE: Sorry, I'm going to give you the same answer, and it's going to be both. Actually both are true, to have some guys that you really believe in, you can rely on, and also have a team that functions together. Very rarely are we a team that plays to get one particular guy one particular shot in one particular moment. I actually don't think the game calls for that.

I think those circumstances are far and few between. They exist, but I think they're far and few between. The way the game is played now.

Now it's about putting the right guys in the right action with the right decision-makers, kind of fueling them with the right anticipation of what coverage they're going to see and how they're going to see it and then let them execute accordingly. That's what we work towards.

But certainly there's going to be -- it's not just going to be the right guy, but it's going to be the right combination of guys at the right moments with the right matchups and we're trying to steer them into the right actions. That part is very, very important.

You can see all the variables we just introduced to the conversation. Kind of the arithmetic of it is to call on one guy and call his number and the calculus of it is to consider all the different variables and actually mesh a group together that's going to function late in the game. And that's why coaching is so fascinating. That's why I love it so much.

So it's both. Sorry.

Q. What can you say about the strength of the SEC? You're kind of entering it at its peak, as many as 10, 11 teams in the NCAA Tournament. What can you say about it going in as high as it is?

MARK POPE: Yeah, so we walked into the Big 12 last year for the first time and the toughest league in the country, and as things go, we get to walk into the toughest league in the country now in the SEC a year later. It's pretty remarkable.

I think nine teams are in the top 25, and it's 40 percent -- forgive my math. It might be a little stretch. But 38 percent of the top 25 is in our conference alone.

That's pretty astonishing. It actually reminds me of when I played here 30 years ago. This league was just so dominant, and it seems like that's where it's posturing to be right now.

Just in reference to our experience in great leagues, I probably had more fun coaching than I've ever had before last year in the Big 12. It's such an incredibly competitive league. Every single game you play is against a top-25 opponent. The SEC venues, per usual, Kentucky was right there at the top of attendance charts last year, but we have three teams, three venues in the top 5 in the country in terms of attendance. You can go on and on about this league.

But right now it is a gauntlet that is to be respected and probably feared a little bit, and all of that feeds exactly into what we love with this game. We're incredibly blessed to be here in this league when it's so powerful and it's so strong, and it's really setting the standard for college basketball right now, and can't wait to get to it.

Q. I don't usually ask questions about coaches'



fashion choices, but I'm wondering what the story -- that jacket doesn't look 30 years old. Where did you get it and all that?

MARK POPE: So we actually do these photo shoots with our recruits, and so Mark Evans, who is probably the greatest equipment guy ever to live since the great Bill Kitley, he is exactly the heir to this legacy, if you follow great managers in college athletics and college basketball, but he put together a rack for us, for our recruits to come in and put on swag. And I saw this jacket, and I'm like, forget the recruits, man, that is too good, I've got to have it.

In a general sense, as an old man, I'm trying to look a little younger.

Q. Coach, I know you and your staff are really big into analytics, so I've got a number questions for you. Last year, according to KenPom, you guys were 84th nationally in adjusted tempo. Do you anticipate playing faster than that this year, and if so, does the experience you brought in kind of help that?

MARK POPE: Yeah, so tempo is really important to us. We talk about pace spacing and extra pass, and we're keen on the thrust of the game, kind of that initial thrust of the game. And then across half court, we also talk a lot about pace in the half court, even on dead balls when you walk it up, and kind of igniting pace in the half court is incredibly important to us.

We would like to stay squarely in the top third of the country, which is where we live, and if we can get to the top 6 in the country, top 7 in the country, that would be really important to us.

I think good offense comes with pace for sure, and that's just -- the low-hanging fruit on that is transition offense. The more interesting part of that is the pace of your movement away from the ball, the start and finish of cuts, kind of navigating the court where you're overloading certain sides, and all of that comes together and all of it's really important.

Not all of that is contained in that KenPom stat, but some of it is.

Q. Coach, it was very clear to the state of Kentucky that your introductory press conference in Big Blue Madness were really special events and special moments. What would you say about how the fan base has welcomed you and your team just a few months in to you all being here?

MARK POPE: Yeah, it's just -- there's nowhere like it. It

just is so unique. We got to see the press conference, we got to see it at Big Blue Madness, listen, there's great programs all across the country with incredible fan bases, and the vast majority of them are in this league, in the Big 12, and then there's just Kentucky, and it's almost unexplainable. It's a one of one in that sense.

So our guys feel it. One of the great things about Big Blue Madness is when you walk into a gym for Big Blue Madness, which is a giant pep rally where we all just get to gather and show each other that we care and how much we care about this program and how much we love it, and you have 22,000 people show up and tickets sold out in 24 minutes for a pep rally, it's just a one of one.

You walk in, our guys get announced, and it's like mayhem and craziness and wonderment, and it's so fun. And it's one of the things -- it's one of those things that you imagine as a ten-year-old thinking about someday playing at the highest level of college basketball.

So you have all that. But then you walk out of the gym carrying the weight of it, also. It matters. And it matters in a special and unique way at Kentucky. It just does. There's no way to ignore it.

When you put those two things together, it's very special. So people have been incredibly welcoming, and we talk about all the time this is Kentucky's team, this is BBN's team, and our guys feel that. That's a really special place.

We have a collection of guys that really care deeply about this team and deeply about each other, and they've learned each other and practiced loving each other really hard for the last six months, and we're going to share that with this fan base, and it's going to be really special.

Q. To elaborate on Jaxson Robinson, he is the only player that has ever played for you in the past. How are you going to lean on that, and how important is that going to be for his leadership role?

MARK POPE: Yeah, I'll answer your question with a story. We did a team retreat to eastern Kentucky. Still people reeling from the floods. I know there's been such recent disasters, also, and the guys built a couple homes, relocation homes, and did some projects at individual people's homes.

And then the last morning we all gathered together, and our little team devotional, each of the guys voiced one thing that they were going to really commit to this team, and I thought Jaxson Robinson was super insightful, which he is.

He's so intelligent. He said, Guys, what I want to offer this team this year, among other things, is I want to be a translator, not just translating the words and terminologies, helping do that with this coaching staff and with Coach, but also translating in terms of how this game is supposed to feel when it's right, playing it the way that we do.

And how guys are supposed to feel about how they communicate, the urgency of our communication, all those little things that are really feel things, where Jaxson is actually capable, Hey, guys, just pay attention because this is exactly how it's supposed to feel.

One of the ways that he's going to make a huge contribution is being a translator, and that's a real gift for me.

Q. Obviously there's a lot of challenges that go into having a completely new roster and so many players coming in, trying to learn your system. What are some of the X's and O's challenges that you've faced in trying to get these transfers and these freshmen to all speak the same language since they come from different places and have to mold their terminology and what they know about offense, about defense to what you want them to be doing?

MARK POPE: Yeah, so I've been really blessed. I have a group of players that are incredibly curious. They're veteran, veteran guys. They've won a ton of games, and they've all done it different ways. But I have a locker room that's incredibly curious.

It comes from humility. It's in this place of humility and curiosity, and it's how when you're blessed with those two character traits and you embrace them, you have a chance to grow really, really fast.

And so I don't have a lot of guys that are trying desperately to hold on to a way they did it somewhere else or how they've done it before. I have a bunch of guys that are like, okay, we're on a mission right now to come together kind of under one banner, and so it's been pretty smooth sailing in that sense.

There's habits that have to change. There's mentality. I had an interesting conversation with Koby Brea, who had the most efficient offensive season in the last decade in college basketball at a high mid-major or high major player of any player in the last decade, and we got in fights the first few weeks about, Why are you not shooting that shot? I need you to shoot that shot. And here he shot 50 percent from the three-point line last year.

So there are spaces like that where our guys are learning

to believe in what we do. And so that's a process, but we have a bunch of guys that are super humble and super curious, and that makes it a great process.

Q. You mentioned playing outside competition for the first time. What can you learn playing against somebody else about your team that you can't learn at the Craft Center?

MARK POPE: Well, the fun thing is where you get exposed. You play against each other, you're playing a similar style because everybody is playing the same style in our gym, so you're just hungry to get exposed.

So show us what we don't know yet about our team. We have two exhibitions against two teams. We're playing the defending national champ Division II team, and so we're going to get exposed. We're just hungry.

I have a group, like I said, that's humble and curious, and we're actually dying to get in the film room and be like, okay, show us what we're not doing well, where are the holes and cracks in what we do so we can go fix them and build them back up.

And that's what you get from playing other teams. We're really eager. We're at the point now where we're really eager to go face some opponents because we need to be a great team by the time March comes around, and you need to learn that and take in all that information and learn the principles where we can combat the little holes that we have, so that's what outside games do.

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