

# 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



THE MODERATOR: We welcome Mark Pope to the podium from the University of Kentucky.

MARK POPE: I'm supposed to give some type of opening statement here maybe (smiling).

John Wooden's birthday, one of the great leaders in all of sport. Kind of woven his DNA into everything basketball. That's actually incredible.

It has been the greatest year of all time for the Pope family as we've got to immerse ourselves in Kentucky basketball. We're incredibly excited about what we have going on this year.

That's all I got for you guys. Great to see y'all (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Hold on just a second, coach (laughter). We'll start with questions.

**Q. Otega Oweh, Pre-Season SEC Player of the Year. What is his current status? Any concern about missing these first two, three weeks of practice with him?**

MARK POPE: Well, if you're going to have a guy miss the first couple weeks of practice, he really has been out for almost 10 weeks now, he's the guy to do it. There's always concern with health. We're just moving him back into the rotation. He actually was in practice a couple days ago in his first live scrimmage, really his first possession of live scrimmage.

We're all kind of walking on eggshells. He got a steal, raced down the floor, outside the free throw, dunked it. As a coach you shake your head, Young people. We love these young people (smiling).

Otega is a guy where you cannot turn off his competitive

motor. He's been through this. He understands it. He knows what he's in for. He understands the pressure of the moment, he understands everything that Kentucky is. He embraces it. He can't get enough of it.

I don't have a lot of concerns about him. Obviously we like all of our guys to stay healthy.

**Q. Kentucky debuts at number nine, Louisville 11. What does it mean to the game that both of those squads, that rivalry is back to the prominent place it once was at?**

MARK POPE: I think it's good for the game when the teams with great tradition are good. Like, I mean, how fun was the NBA last year with the Knicks being good finally again? It makes everything feel right.

I was elated that we came in at No. 9. We see 9 everywhere we go. We think 9 is in our future destiny. We're chasing it hard. I was really thrilled with that.

**Q. How much consideration, when you were recruiting Jayden out of the transfer portal, because of his injury, was given to just shutting him down the entire season so he can get back to 100%?**

MARK POPE: Well, listen, he is as unique an individual as I've ever the privilege of recruiting, coaching, and being around, both physically and mentally and intellectually and emotionally.

With him, he is racing back to health at light speed right now. It is remarkable what he's doing. We're all kind of shaking our heads and feeling like how is this humanly possible.

Feels like he's on the verge of being ready to go, and we're just hitting the brakes full-time right now to make sure because his future is going to be incredibly bright in this game.

I'm not sure exactly how long the wait is. I don't think there's a chance we could keep him from playing this season. I think he's too excited, too talented, worked too

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hard to get back. He's going to be really special.

**Q. A little more dressed up this year. Any thought to doing a letterman-style jacket, something more dressed down like last year?**

MARK POPE: It's interesting. You spend your whole life paying no attention to what you wear. You're like the fifth or sixth person in the last five minutes that asked me about the letterman's jacket, which I appreciate.

Honestly, I lost a lot of sleep on my wardrobe choices last night. Decided to go with little more conservative sport coat. We'll see how this plays, then we'll run it back some other way next year (smiling).

**Q. We heard this kind of varying number about 30 to 35 three-point attempts per game. You ended up with 25 and change. Do you think this roster is closer to being able to play to that level or does it not matter?**

MARK POPE: It matters to us. It's important. I think we're closer to playing it because we want to get more possessions in the game. We're fighting two battles right now analytically.

One of the things that we found interesting in our research this summer is top teams defensively actually extend out the defensive possession longer, almost eight seconds, universally for top 10, top 20 teams. We're trying to extend out this game on our defensive side of the ball and make it faster and more aggressive on the offensive side of the ball.

We might be able to approach that number because I think we're going to be capable of having more pace in this game. It's always going to be more important how we play. The way we fundamentally approach this game is all about gravity. Everything we think about in this game is how do we treat gravity. You achieve gravity with space, great cutting, smart cutting, intelligent cutting, where you bring bodies together, then you create vacuums.

The three-point shot is part of that. Listen, there's nobody in the world more proud that last year's team made more threes than any team in the history of Kentucky basketball. I would like to run that back times two this year. I think we have a group that can do it.

This group might not have come in with the reputation as being as prolific three-point shooters as some of the guys we brought in last year. The progress they made every single week during the summer was remarkable. We have some guys that are shooting the ball at such an elite level right now, it's pretty inspiring.

We will continue to push that number as high as we can. Coach Fueger and I are still arguing about it.

**Q. You talk about Jayden and his timeline. What does it mean for the next couple of months for Malachi and B.G. to take advantage of the extra time and extra reps until we get Jayden back?**

MARK POPE: Yeah, it's interesting how this goes because right now you go for these -- whether it's two-a-days or long practices, and you can't get a single rep off, especially for those two, right? So they're taking full advantage of it. We just scrimmaged. In our most recent scrimmage, Brandon Garrison, I talked about this a little bit, but he was the fastest guy up and down the floor every single possession. It was unbelievable what he's doing. He's actually taking more advantage of every single opportunity rep right now because he's got himself in such great shape.

Malachi is making an incredible impact right now. He's in the 80s field goal percentage. Playing five-on-five for us right now. Unbelievable on the glass. His ability to rim protect outside of his area. He's one of those guys he does things on the floor, you shake your head and be like, I didn't know that's the guy I recruited a year ago. He's been such an impactful freshman for us so far in training camp.

Those two get it. They love each other right now because they are pushing each other so hard. It's a fistfight every day, and they're both getting better because of it. It's pretty fun to watch.

**Q. Next week Kentucky may be doing something for the first time: playing a pre-season game, exhibition game, against the No. 1 team in the country. Talk about your expectations for the exhibition game.**

MARK POPE: We were really excited, we put the schedule together, kind of ease our way into the season. My expectation is that Rupp is going to be on fire and our guys are going to be super nervous. It's going to be the first time with this group ever being together on the floor.

I expect we're going to see things where we shake our head in disbelief, like, what were we thinking. I think we're going to shake our head and think that's amazing, I didn't actually expect to see that. We're going to see all things.

It is such a gift to college basketball players. I'm grateful to the NCAA and all the committees that are allowing us to play Division I opponents in the exhibition. We're all creating these more new teams than they've ever been every single year. The opportunity for us to go against the No. 1 team in the country this early before the season even

starts, where we can still experiment and try things and learn things about our team. What's great about Purdue is not only the No. 1 team in the country, they're the No. 1 team because they have been together.

Matt could have probably not practiced once the entire summer and come into Rupp and put together an incredible product on the floor. One, he coaches so well. Two, his guys know everything they do already.

We're not just going against the No. 1 team in the country, but we're going against the most experienced, most well-prepared, well-coached team in the country.

To get that data, like, in the pre-season before you're actually playing real games is a gift. Even more important, for BBN, for our fan base, there's no words to describe them, I'm just happy for our fan base.

It's an unbelievable opportunity. I'm grateful for it. I'm hoping the NCAA pushes it to four, five or six pre-season games. We'll see if we get there. But I'll take two this year.

**Q. Obviously you brought in Denzel Aberdeen, a player who was on the floor at the end of the national championship game, which speaks to how he was trusted. What intangible things does he bring to the program? Talk about the role that you sold him on to come play for a rival.**

MARK POPE: Denzel Aberdeen, everybody at Florida knows this, too, beautiful, just a pure competitive spirit, which kind of our whole team feels like they're embodying right now. This love of competition, a fearlessness about the way he competes, that he's willing to step on the floor. He's not scared of taking an L, but he is going to fight you to the death to win everything.

If we put him out there and play Tiddlywinks or do a game of Uno, I think our guys would lose their mind.

We had a bunch of guys over to the house, playing Bank, nonsensical dice game, where you decide when you're going to save your numbers. I got so competitive that one of my assistant coaches broke my dining room chair. I still haven't forgiven him for that. Mikhail McLean. I'm coming for you (smiling).

Denzel is the embodiment of this joy and passion to compete. I think everywhere he's gone in his career I think he's left fans incredibly inspired. Certainly he's going to do it at the University of Kentucky. It's contagious with our guys. Certainly he's going to be loved by BBN.

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