

University of Kentucky Basketball Media Conference

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Coach Mark Pope

Press Conference



MARK POPE: I'll start with a little sermon that I enjoyed so much on Sunday. I speak no Japanese but was introduced to this concept of moons be still. I promise this is going somewhere.

If you do a really bad Google search translation you get something like nothingness and I love this idea so much right now. We're kind of in the throws of this brilliant, incredible opportunity.

We're spending time with our staff and our team talking about finding moments just to be still. From a religious perspective, be still and know that I am God; from a team perspective just be still, just find a quiet moment off of your phone, off of media, off away from guys where we can be still in this melee and it's awesome.

So I think it's important for our guys. It's certainly important for our (lost audio) as soon as I'm done with you guys I'm going to take two minutes and be still.

Q. Who in your family is the best athlete and do you think can do their sport?

MARK POPE: Interesting enough, I did not come from a family that was very much into athletics. We had people in the theater, in the arts. My dad was a debate champion and so we did not have a real athletic background. With that said, I'm still probably the worst athlete of my five brothers and sisters.

Q. Tall and humble. (Laughter)?

MARK POPE: You've got a future, my friend. That's really good. That's really good.

Q. At the introductory press conference, I asked you about getting local talent and you went out and got that. But can you speak to the talent that you have on this roster as well as what you have coming in for the next season and what you've seen from them?

MARK POPE: Yeah, I'm incredibly excited about our guys.

It's brand new to college basketball to go construct the team in a month, right, from scratch, from zero. I think it's just a new -- it's just a new experience.

And I'm really excited about our guys' talent level. I'm really excited about their experience. I'm really excited about their commitment and desire to be here at the University of Kentucky and represent what this place is. I'm excited about their hearts and their insights. I'm excited about how they're growing together as a team. I'm full of optimism and excitement about this team.

I think we as a collective group are going to love watching these guys compete. And we're not going to see perfection, but we're going to see perfect effort and we're going to see close to perfect commitment. And from that, magical things happen. I'm excited about that.

In terms of in-state, local talent, it's always been a really important part of the mix. And the depth of talent in the state of Kentucky will always, like every state, it will have some fluctuations. But there's great talent in this state right now, tremendous talent.

And with that the gift of understanding intimately from the time before you were even born understanding what Kentucky means and what it is. So that will be an important ingredient of how we build this program moving forward.

Q. You're talking about being still. You struck me on that. Why is it important? What's the concern if the team and you guys aren't able to do that? And how hard is it, actually?

MARK POPE: Listen, this opportunity for us to find quiet moments where we can just breathe and be peaceful, I think it's centering. I think it's a way for us to do so many things.

One, it's a way for us to stay calm and focused, which is something that we'll be chasing all season long. I think it's a way for us to stay centered in terms of trying have our internal voice in this locker room and on this team, be louder for us than all the external voices. That's really vitally important.



For every young person right now that's growing up and carrying this around and is immersed in this social media barrage of input and opinions by people that don't really care about you, I think this taking a moment just to be still and listen to your internal voices, I just think is massively important -- probably more here at Kentucky than anywhere else because what makes this space brilliant, if you can handle it in the right way, is the volume, but it can also make it debilitating.

It's something we're spending a lot of time teaching our guys about, thinking about.

Q. You were talking about being here, seems like you handled -- you've been here before -- handling this as everything that it is. How are your guys adjusting coming from some different schools where maybe the spotlight isn't as big, where you go to a football game or go to the mall you're not getting berated by the fans and finding those moments to be still, how are they dealing with that?

MARK POPE: I think our guys are loving it, actually. I think they're enjoying every moment of it. I think we have a bunch of veteran guys. We have some really young guys and we have some veteran guys that are teaching young guys a little bit about what this is. And we're all exploring the whole process together.

Our guys came here as eyes wide open as you can be. When you have guys that have played at one or two other schools and have played three or four years of college basketball, you can't come to Kentucky more prepared than that unless you've been at Kentucky before.

So I think it also gives our guys a brilliant perspective.

One of the gifts of me, I was a transfer also, and I played two years at another school and then transferred here. And the gift that I got was I got to recognize that Kentucky really is different than anywhere else in the country.

Sometimes freshmen don't see that. Our guys do. I think they're appreciating it and loving it. I think they're very humble, understanding that it's a massive, massive beast that they've jumped into. So I think our guys are pretty focused and excited to take it on.

Q. What's your philosophy on starting lineups? Is it best five? Is it best pieces fit together? How hard is it to manage this group with nine guys who have started --

MARK POPE: I'm so sorry, because I'm going to give you

the worst answer it's both and all the above. It really is. I believe in the synergy of every aspect of this game. I think that's such a massive part of this game. I think that's why team sports are brilliant.

So there's going to be times when I'm saying, hey, we're going with this starting lineup because these pieces fit together. There's going to be times we'll go with the starting lineup because it's the best five guys. It will be all the answers above.

I think that's a pretty dynamic space. We don't spend a lot of time emphasizing starting. It's finishing that really matters.

Sometimes finishing is even, you know, not the most important thing. There's so many ways that guys make contributions. But there are times when, on paper, it might look like you could make a really rational argument about why things, rotations should work differently, because there's a lot of rational arguments to be made. But we'll consider all those things as we go.

Q. How is the group text going with the former teammates? (Indiscernible) full of advice? Have they slowed down a little?

MARK POPE: I think there's the calm before the storm right now. So I expect -- I'm really toying with the idea of publishing the whole strand as we get closer to it. I think it would be really fun. I don't know if I'm going to do that. Don't hold me to that. But I think it's going to get way more animated as we get closer to games.

Q. You know all about this program as a player. What have you learned about it as a coach so far?

MARK POPE: Great question. I'm really working hard to learn the job because there's no job like it. So, I'm trying to learn it. And it's -- the one thing I know for sure it's the greatest job in all of basketball. There's no place I'd rather be. So I know those things for a fact.

And I think it is going to be certainly the most challenging thing I've done in my career as a player or a coach, even more challenging than surviving Coach Pitino, which is saying something, really.

But I've definitely learned that that's true. I expected that to be the case when I got here.

Q. The lesson of be still and that Japanese proverb, is that as much for a lesson for yourself that you learned what the job is like in the throngs of it as it is for the player?

MARK POPE: Yeah, it just hit my heart hard when I heard it on Sunday. I think it's probably brilliant advice for all of us, actually.

But this job is just begging you to never stop. It's begging you to be so consumed by everything that you never really think and that you never really listen. You never really, really listen. And if we miss on that opportunity, for me in a spiritual sense, if I don't take the opportunity to really stop and listen and kind of commune, I'm not going to be a great coach.

But all of the gravity is asking you just to go nonstop, which feeds into my DNA a little bit. It's how I like to operate.

So it's really important for me. For me to be a great coach, for me to really be a good mentor to these guys, for me to advocate on behalf of this program and this university and this state and represent this the way it is, I'm certainly not going to do it well if I'm relying only on myself and if I'm not taking time to really be still.

It's really important to me. I think it's a big deal. I actually think it's something that I'm advocating for my players and certainly for everyone. I think it's awesome.

Q. There's never been a Kentucky basketball team that's entered a season with this much experience under its belt. How much of that stillness, that steadiness, just comes from that?

MARK POPE: Well, we're counting on it a little bit. It's interesting, it's like everything. As I get older, I find everything is true in a sense. Both things are true.

So, for example, we have one of the most experienced teams in the history of Kentucky basketball. And we don't have a single player on the team that's ever worn a Kentucky jersey. So it's both, right? Both those things are true.

So it's going to be where can we lean? Can we lean on our experience? Can we lean in on our togetherness instead of succumbing to the fact that none of us have ever experienced Kentucky individually or together. So that's the battle.

I have a lot of faith in our guys. I think right now we have enough capital in the bank that I think we can withstand some hits and stay together.

I think the guys, they're learning -- I talk about this all the time, I talk about this to the team. When you're in a huddle and things are going good, everybody faces in and wants

to look each other eye to eye.

It's the same thing in this press room. It's the exact same thing. It's a human condition, human experience. When things are going well, it inspires us to connect.

And when things are going bad, you know, if we have a practice that doesn't go well -- because all the games are going to go really well (laughter) -- if we don't have a practice that doesn't go well, there's a good chance we'll walk in this room and maybe our eye contact isn't as fresh, because what we do is we start to turn away, turn down, look around and we start to get lost in our own head.

That's the battle. And veterans know that battle. They understand it a little bit more because it's exactly the wrong recipe, right? When things are tough, when you're going through tough times, that's when we need to actually look at each other more and see each other more and rely on each other more and communicate more.

That's what our life is begging us to do is to find solutions. But our instincts are to draw back and be quieter and get withdrawn inside of ourselves.

Those are things that you count on veteran players to understand quicker and learn more. And certainly that's what we're talking about on our team.

Q. (Indiscernible) Coach Pitino tweeted out he's going to be here for the Kentucky-Vanderbilt game.

MARK POPE: I'm excited. Coach hit me a week ago. And he kind of asked me but he really told me that he was coming to practice (laughter). So, believe it or not, I said that to the staff. I said, guys, you'll have to carry the day because this is my guy coming in here, Coach P.

I'm really -- listen, anytime I get to spend time with Coach is time incredibly well spent for me. I love him.

Q. You spoke at the beginning about the depth of in-state talent. Obviously you have two guys on this year's roster, Travis Perry and Trent Noah who are acclaimed high school basketball players from the state; they obviously know what this team means to people in the state. But can you speak to what they've shown you in early summer and fall and in their progression?

MARK POPE: I'm fans of these two kids. I'm telling you. I've said this a couple times, but the first day, Travis -- I think Travis has never been fazed by anything in his life. I think he's like a 75-year-old soul in an 18-year-old body.

He's specially built that way. And he came in and said, man, I can't get a shot off. Right? And defensive assignments were really hard and his head was spinning defensively a little bit.

And Trent, who, man, I just think he's really special. I think he's a really special human being. I don't know Eastern Kentucky like people who grew up in Eastern Kentucky; I don't know it well like them. But if you had a guy who was going to represent the eastern half of this state in a brilliant, brilliant way, this Trent Noah is really special that way.

Both guys came in, the first couple days of practice, they were spinning around in circles. And both of them just put their head down and went to work and went to work and went to work. And they're like sieves right now. They are learning so fast.

I tease Trent, he didn't make a shot the first six weeks. I'm, like, we recruited a shot-maker. Where's that part?

What's been great, he's executing things -- in a sense he has a little advantage because he came in here like Todd Laraza (phonetic). There weren't a lot of things that he had to relearn or correct because he hasn't been in college before.

Man, you see him on the floor making decisions that are exactly the way we teach. Right now we teach a little bit different. We're like, man, we talked about that, like, twice and you're executing it already.

So I love these kids. It's really special to have them on the team and they're going to make a huge impact on Kentucky basketball this year and certainly as we move forward with this program.

I'm grateful to have these two guys. I couldn't have asked for better human beings or representatives from the state of Kentucky than these two kids.

Q. Analytics is a big approach to your philosophy, how you go about coaching. In terms of in-game or late-game situations how do you lean on analytics in terms of lineups, who to foul?

MARK POPE: It's interesting, in terms of philosophy we'll rely on it a little bit. All the numbers read out that fouling on a three turns out to be a little bit of a wash. When you do deep dives in the data and all the tangential research.

There are some places where it weighs heavily. Mostly I do what I ask my players to do, right, which is to take in all the information. Be curious, humility and curiosity. You'll hear me talk about that from day one to the end of time.

They're components of players that grow really fast. They're really humble and they're really, really curious and those are almost the same thing.

To take in all that information and you kind of just have to read it in real time.

It's a little bit different than some other sports because basketball is changing so fast. Like the situations change so fast in the course of a game that you end up with a product in the last few minutes of a game that might not be resembling anything like the product you anticipated. And you've probably introduced four or five or six or seven new variables because you don't stop. It just keeps going and going.

So we'll use it really heavily. But it also has massive limitations. You talk about lineup combinations late in the game. The truth is you'll be 18 games in the season and you still don't even have anywhere near close to enough data to actually rely on it at all.

You kind of have a bunch of biases that you rely on, is probably what you do as a coach, because like I've said before, in the NBA, you really start to rely on some of the analytics 41 games in of 48-minute games of way more possessions. And we just never approximate that information over time. We just don't get that dataset. So it's a balance.

Q. I've heard you say in the past that you don't mind being called out if you do something wrong. It's kind of music to our ears. We don't hear --

MARK POPE: Great. That was a big mistake. I knew when the words came out, this was going to be a big problem (laughter).

Q. What do you think is the role of local media in covering the home team?

MARK POPE: Listen, I think -- I've said this before, I really believe it -- I think storytelling now -- storytelling has always been a driving force in every community and society. Storytelling. Storytelling. And storytelling in all of its different forms.

As a debater, you're a storyteller. As a business owner, you're a storyteller. Certainly as a coach, you're a storyteller. As a religious figure, you're a storyteller.

Listen, this is going to be a long answer. Are you ready for this? One of the greatest things about Big Blue Madness is, yeah, it's fun and the floor is going to be incredible and unprecedented. And our guys get to be introduced and



there's going to be mayhem and chaos and all the things that happen at Big Blue Madness.

But the best thing about it is that we're all in the same building together. That's it. It's this -- we all get to connect with each other, and that's the brilliant part of it. It's the first time in the season where 23,000 of us get to be in the same room together and just feel each other, right? It's the best thing about sport.

So when I think about the local media and the national media and everybody that covers Kentucky basketball every single day, I think what I'm grateful for is storytelling. And it's actually doubly good when it's relatively accurate storytelling (laughter).

But when stories are boring -- I hate to say this, but it's just true -- stories are boring if it's just kind of, like, glossy the whole time. It doesn't capture us as human beings if it's just kind of soft and surface the whole time, because what we're really taken by as human beings is when things look like they're going bad and everyone kind of makes a judgment and then all of a sudden they're not going bad anymore. And you're caught up in -- all of us feel moments in our life where things are going bad, where we doubt and we're unsure and we're insecure. We're thinking maybe we need to change course. And we get to see that in sport every day.

If we're not actually really telling the story, then I think we lose that connection that's so brilliant that we're going to be able to experience in Big Blue Madness.

I'm not begging you to say all the terrible things about me, for sure. But telling the story matters.

Listen, if Kentucky basketball, at the end of the day, if the best and only thing that Kentucky basketball has to offer is having a great team, and there's no, like, connection behind it, it's not doing what -- that's not what's made it different than everyone else.

What's made it different than everyone else is the connection that's 23,000 of us get to feel when we walk in that arena Friday night. And storytellers actually make that accessible to everybody. It's super important.

Q. First off, there's perceived that there's a big jump for him, coming from where he came from and now being able to (indiscernible). How have you seen him adapt to that? And do we, as outsiders, overrate that perceived jump because today (indiscernible) basketball?

MARK POPE: Ansley is really interesting. I'll tell you

something about it and it'll make the jump a little -- like the pundits in the basketball world that don't do deep dives might think, man, there's a big jump. But when you get in the weeds it's actually not just a big jump. It's a perfect fit.

You think about Ansley, grew up in the northeast. Incredible family. Is a self-made player in a number of different ways. Like, who he is right now is so diametrically different than who he was when he walked on the campus his freshman year. How he's grown, his growth trajectory is incredible.

He's a finance major. He's a brilliant young man. He digests information in life and in basketball so fast. He's become an elite level scoring, shooting, growing into passing big. He's a perfect fit for us.

So the prognosticators, we miss because we just don't have time. It's nobody's fault. If people weren't going crazy about Ansley as they were evaluating the 1800, give or take, players in the portal, that's no slam on them. It's just they don't have the time to do the deep dives we have.

He's actually a perfect fit here at the University of Kentucky for this first year. I'm so excited to have him.

Q. Obviously there's a lot that's still going to happen between now and the Champions Classics. The big game, first big game, I know you're excited about it and the fans are excited. Do you feel like your team is going to be ready to hit the ground running, or with this puzzle is it going to take a little while for you to piece it together?

MARK POPE: I know for fans they might chalk it up as the first big game. But the first big game for us is the Blue-White Scrimmage. That's the first one. I know that's a disappointing answer for you, but it's actually really true. It's really true for us.

Then we have two huge exhibitions where we get to be out and we play Wright State and Bucknell. Those are huge games. It will always be this way for us.

And this is actually super genuine. This is not -- if you just watch football last week, you get a real sense of if your biggest game is not your next game, then you've made a serious error in underestimating the greatness of sports, right?

With that said, I totally understand what you're asking, but if I don't say that, then my players are like, yeah, you really -- but it's genuinely true.

I think that these classics are really tremendous. You get a

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

chance to play the most storied, best programs in the country. So we look forward to them certainly through the course of our season.

We talk about banners all the time. We love to have it floating out there, but all of our focus is actually on today. Like, all of our focus right now is on today's practice that we've got to get better today. And if we put the days together, if we stack the days, then we'll be ready.

Q. We know you like being able to pass the ball. And talking to Brandon Garrison in a media window a few months ago, he said, I think Amari and I are some of the better passers in college basketball last year. What have you seen from them in the summer and fall? And do you think they've lived up to that with regard to passing the ball?

MARK POPE: Yeah, actually, I had the great fortune of coaching (indiscernible) Kalif this last season. [Inaudible] about the game. And just by seeing what they can do and how far you can push them, how far you can take their talent and just stretch it and how much you can utilize it.

So he actually changed the way that I think about processing the game a little bit, changed passing angles and changed passing alternatives and tracking the whole process of tracking as a big when you're working in any number of actions.

So I was super -- last year was so fun learning. As a coach, it was so fun learning and trying to stretch my players and myself.

So we kind of came into this year thinking, hey, so now we got to learn it, see it, and watch it and really expand and explore it, but can we teach it? And that has been such a fun process this year.

And these guys have picked it up. Like, I'm shocked with how fast they've picked up kind of this new way of decision-making as a decision-maker for a five. It's actually super great.

We knew they were talented passers coming in, but expanding their range of how they think about delivering the ball has been great, and they're making huge progress. I think we're going to love watching these bigs go to work. I really do. I think there's times where, wow, I did not see that coming. I'm looking forward to that.

Q. Vandercamp (phonetic), best shot, the team in the country what's the process been like for you (audio buffering) for you bringing together all these individuals and turning them (audio buffering).

(Audio missing)?

MARK POPE: The way we cover most guys. No slam, but in the media, it's different than the way we cover most guys. It's different than the highlight films we normally see. The things we value on our team that we think are extraordinary play-making attributions probably aren't going to show up on the highlights.

But they're massive highlights for the people that are just living hugely in the weeds of the game, which would be limited to just about every member of BBN. This is why it's going to be so fun to share this product with our fan base. But our guys are jumping in hard and they're doing a great job.

Q. You talked a lot about having one of the most experienced teams in college basketball, yet they're not experienced playing together. How often have you found yourself them coaching themselves rather than you coaching them?

MARK POPE: We're working really hard on that. The first four or five weeks we got a lot of -- we try to put the guys in the huddle and be, like, go handle it. And there was a lot of blank stares.

Of course there was because guys hadn't learned our terminology and vernacular. They hadn't learned kind of how we see the game.

And so what's fun is, in the past, it's kind of like you take a player and you get him for a year and you talk to him and at him for a year and he starts to digest it. And then you know you're making progress when he starts to actually repeat the words.

So we've just tried so hard to expedite that process, almost like -- I've talked about this a lot in medical school. So, see one, do one, teach one, that process.

So our guys have really done an unbelievable job expediting that in a lot of different areas where I'm really proud of how they're working and it's becoming almost natural, instinctive to come into a huddle or on the floor to communicate.

Now, we have simple places where we're still like, you know, declaring the ball in transition -- defense has been a major principle for us the last couple of weeks and we're thinking about it so much that we get distracted by the most simple concept. We still have plays where we have massive growth to do. But I've been really proud overall of the guys' progress.

Q. We're super excited as college students for you coming back. And I know an older generation like my mom who was here when you were here.

MARK POPE: Thanks for saying your mom and not your grandmother. I appreciate that because I'm getting some grandmas that were here with me, I'm just like, wow, I'm getting old.

Q. My mom, but she's a huge fan. But what does it mean for you to be back here and coaching this team but also as a champion for the Wildcats yourself?

MARK POPE: You know, there's a million ways I can answer that question but let me tell you one of the ways. I don't know, guys, this is going to sound so petty but it's not. It's going to sound petty and let me explain.

So from time to time I get to sign an autograph and below it I get to put "'96 champs." And it's not -- it's actually not -- that sounds super petty, right, because on the petty side I recognize that that's just a little bit bragging rights and it's a little bit like there are not many people that get to write that.

But what means so much to me is that in that 9-6 C-H-A-M-P-S exclamation mark, is like a whole lot of fight, blood, sweat and tears and together and, like, leaning on guys and a lot of doubts and worries and frustrations and hopes and perseverance and all that's wrapped up into that.

I'm grateful that I get to do that and be here and do that because that's what I want for my guys so badly. I want for our guys -- I want them to be able to write that for their year and then to be able to write that C-H-A-M-P-S underneath it.

And it's not about that. It's not about bragging rights or anything else. It's about like the mmm, that you know that nobody else knows except the other guys that were in that locker room that really, really know. And then how you grow as a human being through it.

So I'm so grateful to be back here to take our big swing at it and see if we can get there. I like all of our guys to be able to write that.

Q. You've talked about having to start from scratch. Can you talk about how you identified some of the portal targets early on? And also Coach Brooks and Harden who you hadn't worked with before.

MARK POPE: I'll start with the coaches. Coach Hart, I played with at Milwaukee. He's one of my favorite human

beings in the world. He's a big-time coach. And he's had incredible success at the college level and at the professional level coaching.

Like, he's a veteran, veteran coach, who is -- I'm going to be shocked if all these guys aren't gone next year with head jobs, which is the goal.

So I've known him and loved him and admired him for a long time. He does incredible work.

And then Coach Brooks, I didn't know as well, but I knew his reputation. Everybody in basketball knows his reputation. And then through conversations, I realize -- you'll hear me say this so many times because it's so true -- he's such a better person than he is a coach. He's one of the most recognized coaches, associate head coaches in all of college basketball. But he's an incredible person.

It's kind of like when I sit down with a recruit or I sit down with current players and their families and the floor slides over to Coach Brooks, I'm like, yep, you're welcome, people, enjoy this because he's really special.

I actually feel that way about every single guy on my staff. I'm really blessed to be able to work with great people on my staff. I'm really excited.

And then in terms of our players, it was a fun process because when you're working out of the portal, you have film in college on every single player. We got to be as specific as we could. It was pretty easy to target the guys, look at his game, and he fits just exactly what we do uniquely and so we're really excited about that.

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