

# CBS Sports Classic: Kentucky vs. Ohio State

Saturday, December 21, 2024

New York, New York, USA

Madison Square Garden

**Kentucky Wildcats**

**Coach Mark Pope**

**Otega Oweh**

**Andrew Carr**

Press Conference

Ohio State 85, Kentucky 65

MARK POPE: A ton of credit to Ohio State. They beat us in pretty much every facet of the game, and they deserve a lot of credit. Congratulations to them.

We are clearly not -- there's a lot of ways we can get a lot better. I felt like our guys tried -- we were trying to find some juice, find some energy, find some fight, and we just fell a little bit short.

We'll take questions.

**Q. Andrew or Otega, it seemed like you guys got a couple easy baskets at the rim early on and they were really challenging throughout the game, very well. What did you see there?**

ANDREW CARR: Yeah, I think we kind of knew going into the game that they helped a lot, especially once we got into the paint. Felt like we probably could have done a better job of when things aren't going our way to play off two feet, go back to being the fundamentals of the game, and stopping at the rim, and we'd be able to get whatever we wanted. Definitely something to learn and improve on.

**Q. Mark, you guys have been able to have some second half comebacks in games you've fallen behind. What's the key to avoiding those first half deficits that have become a habit lately?**

MARK POPE: Yeah, so a couple things. One, we just never could kind of find the piece of the game. We had a tough time finding the pace of the game. Bruce Thornton really controlled the entire game the entire time in every



single facet of the game. They were comfortable holding the ball, and it was hard for us to manage that, hard for us to guard in space.

Listen, I have beautiful players on this team and people and terrific basketball players. We just couldn't find any way to put any energy into this game.

**Q. Mark, defensively it seemed like you guys were never, ever able to sustain some stops together, put some stops together, a season-high allowed field goal percentage. What did they do successfully or what were you not able to do defensively?**

MARK POPE: Yeah, they rejected us a ton, and it was really hard for us. It was just surprising. We've been pretty solid in that space. We just got rejected over and over and over again. It was a schematic issue on my part in terms of I've been fighting to push our bigs up to the point of the screen and thinking we can manage it.

So when you push your bigs up to the point of the screen and you get rejected, the lane is wide open. So that's an issue that I have that I've got to fix.

We tried a bunch of different scheme changes, and we just at the end of the day -- Thornton was too good for us. That was just today. He was just too good for us today. Kind of everything we tried seemed like he had a pretty good answer for us.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned energy, trying to find something. What could have Kerr brought to this game?**

MARK POPE: Well, Kerr is a terrific player. He's terrific. But we have the guys on this team to go win this game. We just didn't.

So that's a space where we'll continue to grow. Kerr is making huge contribution for us in the locker room and on the bench, and he'll continue to do that, and we certainly need that from him.



**Q. They talked about the comebacks that you guys had against Duke and Gonzaga and you got so close against Clemson. You struggled tonight but there's a 10-day break coming up. How do you think this team is going to respond going forward with the break coming up?**

MARK POPE: I know exactly how these guys will respond. They're going to really, really try as hard as they can to not let this destroy their couple days off. Their job is to get really fresh right now when we get back together on the 26th.

And I know these guys; they'll come in and -- it's not going to be just empty emotion. It's going to be like, we're going to get better, and these guys will get better, and we've just got to keep trusting what we do.

We had some defensive struggles tonight and then we just fell to pieces offensively, and we just went to our default, and our default is not right yet. Our default is still bad habits. It's not bad habits coming from a bad place in guys' hearts. It's coming from a great place. It's coming from a desperation to help our team. But we don't do that by ourselves.

We do it disciplined, and we do it the way we do it, and we do it by making plays for each other, and that's still not our default. That's just a trust-building process.

Sometimes when things go wrong, you can build your trust because you get to see, hey, this doesn't work when we do this this way. But these guys will respond beautifully because they're incredible young men and they'll come back and work like crazy and they know who they represent and how much it means, and it's incredibly painful to lose this game. But they'll respond.

**Q. For the players, it seemed like you all, with everything that was going wrong, you were still getting good looks and good shots and some of them just didn't fall. What was that like? Could you feel that pressure and disappointment mounting? How much tougher did that make it?**

OTEGA OWEH: I mean, that's just kind of basketball. Sometimes the ball doesn't go to the rim. We've just got to find other ways, and we didn't today. But we will next time. We just have to find ways to just have high energy at all times, even when the ball is not going in. On the defensive end I feel like we could have sparked some energy there, maybe get some easy baskets by creating turnovers.

Unfortunately we didn't, but that's okay, we'll learn and get better.

**Q. Coach, you've been pretty frustrated with shots going in the last couple weeks, after Louisville especially. Just 22 again tonight. What's not working in your favor there, and how do you get that number up?**

MARK POPE: Yeah, in the second half we really -- man, we struggled. We just fell into a space where it was trying to fix the team, me trying to make a play to fix the team instead of trying to fix the team by making a play for my team.

I know that sounds 30,000-foot level, but it's just -- there was a bunch of possessions our guys wish they could get back. When they look at it, they'll be like, man, that's exactly what we don't do.

But it takes a ton of discipline. You're fighting a ton of battles, and when you get stressed and you can't -- I needed to help these guys more on the defensive end, and we just couldn't find an answer there, and we deal with all that baggage and then you're slippage -- our default is not the right -- we'll get there. They've grown so much, and we'll continue to grow and we'll get better.

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