

CBS Sports Classic: Kentucky vs St. John's

Saturday, December 20, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

State Farm Arena

Kentucky Wildcats

Coach Mark Pope

Jaland Lowe

Jayden Quaintance

Press Conference



-- they got him in a spot where we could just go feel this experience out and go figure it out.

So those guys got him ready and he came in. Ton of courage. You come back from an injury like that and there is a lot of room for you to question things, but JQ is just bold and brave and fearless to the point where he makes me nervous. But it was pretty special.

So huge credit to him and the whole performance team.

Kentucky 78, St. John's 66

MARK POPE: JQ is going to give our opening statement.

JAYDEN QUAINANCE: For sure, this has been a long time in the making and I couldn't have been here at all without the help of the people on my right. We've been here every day since June and working every single day, to the point where we got catch phrases and stuff to get you through every day.

(Brandon) Wells made them for us for game day to celebrate all the work we put in. Without you guys, Randy Towner, Coach Mikhail, I don't think I could have been here today.

MARK POPE: I'll just add to that while we have these guys here. I've been in this game for a long time and I've worked with a lot of guys, and I've never worked with a performance team that is this dedicated and has (indiscernible)... from an incredibly serious, serious injury. To what these guys did ... Pretty incredible. So B Wells, Randy. Unbelievable job. Thank you Brandon.

Q. Mark, can you talk about the impact that Jayden had on this team tonight?

MARK POPE: Well, you guys know as much as I do, we just don't have all a lot of data, right, so we went into this game, JQ and I and his dad and the performance team had a lot of conversations over the last seven months, and then especially over the last week just about how this rollout should go, could go, would go.

I'm grateful for that whole team that gave us -- JQ and me

Q. JQ, how difficult was it for you to sit out the past couple months and watch these games, and how much fun was today? It looked like you were having a ball out there. -

JAYDEN QUAINANCE: Yeah, I mean, I been a competitor my whole life. I was always raised as competing. That's all I ever wanted to do. I would always find some type of (indiscernible). Watch my team go and be without me, not being able to help, just kind of be on the sidelines. But I continue to trust my guys and I feel like that trust in guys built just being here on the bench support that way showed on the court, and it kind of translated over. All my guys trusted me and we just were able to show out at a high level tonight, so I feel like it's been difficult but it's been good.

Q. Jayden, were you surprised with how you were able to impact this game and the minutes you were able to play, and how did that feel?

JAYDEN QUAINANCE: I felt great. I felt like my condition was good. I felt like my guys had, again, prepared me really well in all the practices months leading up to now.

I felt good on the court. I felt like if I was able to have time to shine I felt like I would make it my moment, and I felt like I did that today.

Q. Mark, is there a time limit, like a plan going forward to protect him? Will he be limited in games and in practices? And with Jaland as well, will you ration

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how much you use them?

MARK POPE: Yeah, JQ is on the way back, so for us it's going to be like how do we feel in the morning. That's just going to be the way it is. His health is so good right now, but it's going to be a matter of how does he feel in the morning and where we do we go from here.

We have a huge game on Tuesday and then we have a break where we have a whole solid week plus of practice where we'll be able to roll in that game. But I think the minute restriction will work its way out relatively quickly.

These guys have done such a great job, and also JQ. If you talk to B Wells and Randy, they'll be like, they've never had a guy that has been willing to do every single thing they ask him to do.

With J Lowe, J Lowe has been petitioning to only be a game player, just free throws in practice, or maybe I've been petitioning for that. So we'll continue to just proceed with caution with him. But he's just so tough. He's so tough. You saw the impact that he can have on our team. You saw one half without J Lowe and you saw one half with J Lowe.

I'm voting for the half with J Lowe actually because he changes everything we do. But we're going to proceed with caution. He's going to fight through this deal and he's going to be great.

Q. Going into this game, obviously St. John's is a very analytical team. Could you discuss what kind of preparation you had going into this, obviously Jaylen going in playing for seven seconds, taking on that injury and then coming back and playing the way he did, just talk about the mental kind of mindset that your team has and how you guys prepared to played your former head coach and how that's been for you guys?

MARK POPE: You know, I was incredibly proud of our group on the defensive side in the first half. I was really proud of us in the first half because we were pretty dysfunctional on the offensive side of the ball, but they never let it take away from their energy defensively. We made some mistakes defensively but our toughness and energy was there the whole time. We probably fouled too much or the whistle blew too much for us in the first half, but I was proud of our guys for fighting to stay with it.

And then, I don't know, you tell them about prep for the second half. What was your locker room experience like at halftime and the first half?

JALAND LOWE: My locker room experience after the seven seconds, sheesh, man, everything was going through my head. I knew after a couple minutes that I was going to be good. I think seeing these guys every day especially a guy like Jayden, they fight every day, and that's just our identity. We fight. We're a tough group. I knew if I was even a little bit good to be able to play I was going to give it a go.

I told these guys at halftime, I'm going to go out there and I'm going to live in it. Like I said to everybody, no matter what day it is, every day I step on the court, it's a risk, but I know what comes with it, and my guys know what comes with it, but at the end of the day I'm a competitor, and I just want to go out there and play.

Q. Following the game (indiscernible) how important was that aspect of the game for you today, and overall (indiscernible) --

MARK POPE: Yeah, it's really important for us. We're going to become a really explosive offensive team. We're going to. It's been a little bit hard. It's been a hard path for us for 100 different reasons. But in the meantime, it's such a massively important part of helping us be functional offensively.

Our guys are willing to do it. We are blessed to have this cohort of bigs that are willing to just go seal for 30 seconds. They just put a body on a body and just seal and duck so we have some space to go there, and it's going to be -- it's a stabilizer, something you can fight for every single game, whether you have rhythm or don't. It's really important.

Q. (Indiscernible) the last time you were here you defeated Duke. Then of course today. Is Atlanta starting to be a special place for Kentucky?

JALAND LOWE: I'm not going to lie, I was in the hotel yesterday and I didn't even know what Catlanta was, and I asked them, what is that? Shoot, the way that these -- I know now for sure. These fans out here are amazing and definitely Catlanta out there today felt like a home game.

That just goes to show how great of a fan base that we have and the support we have no matter what we're going through. It's amazing to see and I've never been around anything like this. I'm going to try to soak it up as much as I can because I know that no matter what level, I don't think anything is ever going to touch this.

MARK POPE: Catlanta is super special to me from when I was playing at Kentucky and we were playing the SEC tournament here. Had those incredible moments in the Georgia Dome, and to last year to this year, this fan base,



this is like a second home for us.

And I'm really grateful that we got to come down here and send everybody home happy, because they're incredible when they showed out like this. We had so many people flying in from all over the country for this game, and I'm happy for all of our fans that they get to celebrate.

Q. Mark, you said a few weeks ago (indiscernible) basketball. How has this story written, against your former team, that JQ comes out (indiscernible) team chemistry and these guys are celebrating together. This is really starting to look like for this team, these guys are together.

MARK POPE: Well, we're writing it, and I think we have the right guys to do it. I'm really confident in this group. Hey, listen, I felt the same way every single day. I have so much confidence in this staff and in this group of players.

It's just been slow for us to grow up and embrace who exactly we are, and we're in that process. We're in the early stages of that process. This is an important day for us because we know back-to-back games, seeing some real physicality and some smash mouth basketball. Sometimes it's ugly, but sometimes it's beautiful like it was at moments in the second half of this game.

I love the journey of a season. Even when it's bad, like I love the pain of it because it makes these nights awesome. I think these guys have a chance to have a lot more of these nights. I really do.

The St. John's team I might know Coach better than -- very few people know him better than me in the sense of how tough he is and how competitive he is and how he gets his team to play hard, and for our guys to stand up to that on a night when we were pretty dysfunctional and J Lowe takes a vacation for the first half. It was good.

Q. (Indiscernible) where is he at offensively (indiscernible)?

JAYDEN QUAINANCE: I feel like Jaland brings a toughness and leadership to the game that we need. Whenever he's on the court he's telling everybody where to be, he's making sure everybody is in the right spots, making sure everybody is making the right cuts. Offensively and defensively he's a vocal leader and he's like an effort leader. You can tell he is giving everything that he has.

He's been super huge for us offensively and defensively. Again, it showed tonight.

JALAND LOWE: I mean, I just listen to these guys. They know the amount of work I put in. They know how much I care about them. I just do what they tell me to do. They want me to go out there and play some defense, I'm going to go play the hardest defense I've ever played in my life.

I've just got a bunch of guys that I love and I trust and I'd do anything for. After that, my game just speaks to the rest. I'll just feed off the energy that those guys are feeding back into me.

Q. Mark, I asked you Thursday what would it mean to you to be coaching you're like I want to be (indiscernible) now not hypothetical it's reality. Does it feel any different to you?

MARK POPE: You guys, this is not about me. I appreciate the question, but the only thing I care about is our team growing. I love Coach. I love Coach. But I'm happy for our guys. I'm happy for them. That's more than enough. Thanks for the question.

I just want to give a shout out to our volleyball team who's about to go win a National Championship. Come on, Cats. It's incredible what these guys are doing. We're trying to follow in their footsteps, man, of how competitive and resilient and refuse to lose they are. It's pretty awesome, so shout out to them.

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