

State Farm Champions Classic: Duke vs Kentucky

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Kentucky Wildcats

Mark Pope

Andrew Carr

Otega Oweh

Press Conference



Kentucky - 77, Duke - 72

ANDREW CARR: What's up guys? I'm going to be giving the opening statement. I wanted to first and foremost appreciate all the fans, the Kentucky fans that are able to show out tonight. It was an incredible atmosphere. It's called Catlanta for a reason, and it's really special for us out there.

Also, just an unbelievable game. It was a true team effort. I felt like it was really special for us. Not everything was going our way, especially in the first half. We come in at halftime, and Coach always talks about just turning into each other, and the people that matter are the people in that locker room. The closer we get, it's harder and harder to break us.

So I feel like we did an unbelievable job of being resilient tonight and then a really special way to come out with the win. Otega made an unbelievable play at the end of the game to kind of seal it with the offensive rebound.

Again, shout out to the UK fans and appreciate it.

Q. Otega, you had a steal at the end of the game. Right before you went out, mark stopped you. Did you talk about making that steal?

OTEGA OWEH: He just told me to go make a play, be aggressive. He trusted me to make those types of plays. I trusted myself to make those plays. We shared a moment, but he just told me to go, to just be me.

MARK POPE: I like that. We shared a moment.

Q. Coach, do you feel with the experience that you have on your team, not just tonight, but throughout the season, that could carry you to where you all want to go?

MARK POPE: Yeah, I like our group. If we had lost this game, I would still like our group. I've been blessed to coach incredible young men. I've been incredibly blessed. This group especially, and they've been that way before we played a game in the summer.

The guys were so intentional. These guys, nobody knew each other. Nobody had ever been with each other. They've been very intentional about getting to know each other. Three or four weeks into the summer, I had guys doing incredibly gracious, generous acts of kindness for their teammates.

We had a bunch of stuff this summer that was tough with guys' lives outside of basketball, family stuff. I think that wins. I really think it wins in the end. These guys have been so intentional about working to love each other.

Q. There were so many ebbs and flows in this game. Was there a moment you felt the tide turning? Was there one play or one hustle play?

MARK POPE: Yeah, I was really proud of how the guys came out in the second half. We're always trying to monitor our energy on the team. The guys are really conscious of where they're letting their minds go, right?

So I think the first half was -- the last ten minutes of the first half was really frustrating for us. We gave up 46 points. That's not characteristic of us. That's not who we are as a team. We had seven turnovers in the first half. That's not characteristic of us.

Credit Duke. Duke's a terrific team. Come on, a ton of credit to this great Duke team. But what I was really proud of is guys went and sat in the locker room, and all it was all constructive. The guys do most of the fixing before I even get in the locker room.

You could see that the way they came out at the start of the second half. It was just sheer resolve and determination, and there was a lot of ebb and flow. The game almost swung away from us there in that first eight minutes of the second half, and then the guys kind of



reeled it in, and it was close for us.

Q. Talk about that resolve, how much resolve did it show when threes aren't falling? That's what a lot of your offense is known for, or maybe when a guy like Jaxson seems to be struggling, and one moment Andrew pulled him aside and kind of gave him a pat on the head. What kind of resolve does it show when the things you're known for aren't happening?

MARK POPE: That's the way our guys have built this. They have all fail safes. There's fail safes everywhere. And mostly the fail safes just comes from their competitive spirit. We have a whole bunch of that.

Andrew mentioned this, but our guys have been really focused on, when things are going tough, it is the psychology of us as human beings that we start to communicate less, we start to get lost in our own heads, and literally and figuratively, you start to turn away from the huddle.

Our guys are incredibly intentional about fighting that, and they're like, no, we're going to turn back to each other. You mentioned guys putting their arms around Jax, for example. That's not just natural. They're fighting actually to make that happen. That's one of the blessings to have beautiful guys on the team.

Q. Mark, you talked to Lamont Butler at the start the second half. You kind of gave him a message. Then you also talked to him at the end of the game when it kind of looked like Kentucky was going to win. Can you share what you told him?

MARK POPE: Me? Oh, Lamont is the foundation of this team. If you get to know Lamont Butler, he's one of the best people I ever met. That's not an overstatement. And he is a winner. He is a winner. So we just talked about we're riding or dying together. That's how this team is.

I feel the same way about Otega. I feel the same way about Drew. We're our guys. We're each other's guys, and we're not going away from each other. If we have a bad half or a bad play or a bad game, we're running back to each other. That was the conversation we had with Lamont. He doesn't need much. He has a winner's heart.

He had an unbelievable second half. He really gave us a massive lift in the second half.

Q. Was there any inkling at all in all the newspaper clippings and rumblings about who Duke is and everything else, did that give you guys a little bit of extra motivation or just a chip on your shoulder?

OTEGA OWEH: I wouldn't say extra motivation because we try and just look at every game like it's a normal game. We prepare the same way. We trust in the work that we do every single day, but we also know the history behind this rivalry. Obviously we want to put on and do well for the Big Blue nation.

We really just want to go out there and do the things we know we can do, stay solid, stay to our principles, and if we do that, we know we're going to get a win, which was the outcome.

Obviously the rivalry is huge, but we didn't look at it just as let's go out there and try to do stuff we don't usually do. Just be calm and composed and play the way we know we have to.

Q. There were two aggressive and ones in the final minute. Did you see something differently as the game went down there or was that just we need to get a couple buckets?

ANDREW CARR: I think that's just the flow of the game. That happens with the way that we play. There's a lot of reading and reacting, and we try to take advantage of how the defense is guarding us. There's switching sometimes and just wanted to continue to try to be aggressive. We always talk about making plays for our teammates.

Able to get in the lane, play off two feet, and able to convert on those plays, but that's just kind of how the game goes and wanted to continue to be aggressive throughout the game, and that's kind of where that led to.

Q. In the off-season, you guys obviously came together, didn't know each other. When did you all start to trust each other in the off-season, and how did that process impact what we saw at the end of this game?

ANDREW CARR: I think it's really important for us, we had a lot of older guys. We really learned each other off the court. A lot of people, a lot of teams are able to say that, but it's really cool being a part of a brand new team just because everybody didn't know anybody else. Everybody had to have the same amount of effort to get to know and love and serve and care for your teammates in the same way because you didn't know any of them.

For us it was a really cool growing experience, and I feel like just because everybody had a concerted effort on it, it allowed us to really connect super quickly and get to know each other super quickly, and it translated right to the court.

OTEGA OWEH: I was just kind of going to piggy-back off what Andrew said. We're an older group, so if we're going to do big things on the court, we have to get along off the court. It kind of started in the summer. We all had a common goal to win big, so we knew, if we want to do that, we have to come together in hard situations. I feel that kind of showed today.

Q. Mark, for you personally, what was that victory lap at the end like, talking to Big Blue Nation like that?

MARK POPE: It's great. I said this in the post-game, but it's really important -- I think one of the things that's great about our team is this is not actually about us. It's not about me. If this gets about me, it gets too big. If it gets about Andrew Carr, it gets too big.

We're a pretty faithful group, and we get to learn that this isn't really about us. So I think the best part about all of us being able to acknowledge our fans in the stands is it's just an extension of that. This is about us, it's not about me.

If Andrew has to carry around the burden of this being about him, it's too big. If Otega has to carry around the burden of this being about him, it's too big, and it's actually not very rewarding. When it can be about us, that's when it's magic. That's the gospel. That's life. This team has really adopted that.

So getting to walk around and just acknowledge everybody, it's like it's us. It's us. It's these guys fighting on the floor. It's all of BBN showing up. It's a brilliant thing, and we get to be at the best place in the world to do it.

Q. Mark, you actually have a veteran team. Did the conversation change in terms of how to handle success? Everybody might have had individual success at different places they were, but I feel like it's different when you're successful at Kentucky.

MARK POPE: Yeah, we'll have the conversation for sure about trying to stay off social media. We'll try and do that. What's ironic -- not ironic, it's just relatively interesting maybe, it's we would be having the exact same conversation if we lost.

When you get a locker room that's right like these guys are trying to grow into a right locker room, you just don't have the space to bring in all the other stuff, right? And most of the things that they're going to hear outside are going to be counter to what is making this group really special right now and gives us a chance to do the impossible, which is to be special throughout the season.

I think we'll continue to have the reinforcing conversation we're having, but I actually think -- I don't know. I think these guys are enjoying this right now.

Q. Going back to big picture, Jaxson obviously didn't have the game he's used to having, but guys just picked him up and find a way to win the game without him?

MARK POPE: We didn't win without Jax because Jax is such an impact guy. Talk about a gravity guy. You just throw Jax on the court, and four guys are leaning towards him. His numbers may not be huge, but he has an impact when he walks in the gym, he has an impact on the scout, he has an impact on all those things.

This team is built this way. Jax is growing into an exceptional leader, just exceptional. These guys know that it's not about him either. That doesn't mean we don't all care and want to be successful individually, we sure do, but it's not about Jax either.

I think Jax has made a huge contribution tonight in all the ways he does. Come on, that's a dangerous man. That's a really dangerous man.

Q. Both players, Mark told me in the spring you saw Otega at Oklahoma, you saw Andrew at Wake Forest. They were good players. Wait until you see them in a Kentucky uniform because of the appreciation. There's a chance it may never have happened. Any of that play into how you guys perform?

OTEGA OWEH: I would just say, you wear Kentucky on your chest, and you have to carry yourself a certain way. You know you're not just playing for yourself. You're playing for a whole nation. You're playing for your brothers.

It's a dream to play for Kentucky. The fact that I'm here, the fact that AC is here, I know it just makes everyone play harder. Obviously just wearing a Kentucky jersey definitely makes you want to go out there and play.

ANDREW CARR: I would agree with Otega, and I would also just talk about the team we have in general too is just so talented. Something that we always talk about as a team is just our run, our whatever it is, we're looking for that Jenga block to fall. We're just going to keep coming at you guys. We're going to keep coming at you guys throughout the game over and over and over again until we go on that run or come back and are able to make an impact on the game.

Whether it's going to be Otega and me and Amari tonight,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

it's going to be someone else, Brandon and Jaxson and Kerr the next night, and that's what really makes our team super special.

So when you're able to surround yourself on a team that Otega talked about, that means that much with amazing people and super talented basketball players, you really trust your teammates and it becomes really special.

MARK POPE: Who gets to coach guys like this? Come on, man.

Q. Mark, how much of the game plan was around trying to contact with your five through the middle of the floor and then the decision to go to Andrew small?

MARK POPE: It's a space we mess around with a lot. Credit to Duke, they chose to guard us in two different ways. One really pressure five and one really back off the five. Both were a little problematic for us with pressure on the court. It was a great game plan on their part, and they executed it really well with the length and talent they have.

We're really blessed. When you think about BG, BG running the floor was so important for us at the five. BG bringing in that 3 was really important for us --

ANDREW CARR: It was a 2.

MARK POPE: Was it a 2? Forget about us. 2 doesn't really matter. Is that really true? You just ruin a great night. I was so excited for BG. He's been dying to get one of those. He wants it so bad. That makes me kind of sad.

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