

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Troy vs Kentucky

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Fiserv Forum

Kentucky Wildcats Coach Mark Pope

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Joined by Kentucky head coach Mark Pope.

Q. After offering to pay for fans' gas money, how many requests have you received and what's the craziest one been?

MARK POPE: I'm on purpose not keeping count because it's -- I want to reduce my stress level before tournament play. But that was not the smartest thing I've ever done.

Q. Mark, you obviously have guys who are veteran guys, experienced guys, but very few have, outside of Lamont, NCAA Tournament success. What to you is the difference, if any, between experience and tournament experience?

MARK POPE: I don't know if there's that much of a difference. We probably make more of it than it is. I say that sincerely. We'll approach this game against Troy like we've approached every single game all season long with the same words, same intensity, same vocabulary, same urgency. We kind of max out the prep and intensity of every game, and so we'll do it the same here.

I think the beautiful thing about experience is -- the one thing about experience is this game can throw so many different things at you. And so the more experience you have, the more you experience, the more memories you have to call back on and be, like, okay, I've been here before. I've seen the scheme before. I've executed in this situation before. I've felt these emotions before.

And so the more familiar experiences can be, that's certainly a bonus. I think our guys have a lot of that.

Q. Mark, Coach Cross looked us in the eye and told us that the tougher team will win this game.

MARK POPE: Yeah.

Q. Do you agree with that? If so, what does your team need to do to be up there in the toughness level?

MARK POPE: I believe that's true with every game you play all season long. I think the toughest team wins. I think that's universal in the game of basketball. But the definition of toughness might be different than what we think. We've talked about -- you guys are so bored of me talking about this, but it's the same thing.

Toughness is not belligerently punching a dude in the mouth. That's not toughness. Toughness is how undistractable can you be? What is your tolerance for staying focused and on the job at hand in this exact moment? How focused can you be on this possession and the next possession, regardless of what the fans are doing or the refs are doing or the score board is doing or anything else?

That's what real toughness is in the game of basketball. Of course there's a physicality component in that for sure. Physicality usually doesn't come from desire or some rage or white-hot intensity. It comes from your ability to be focused on where you are in the moment. That lends itself to the physicality of the game too. I think that's a universal thing.

Certainly in the game of basketball, I think the toughest team wins.

Q. You had talked about experience. I'm wondering, what's the biggest thing you learned from the couple games you coached at BYU on this stage?

MARK POPE: I don't know if there's any huge takeaway. Just confirming that this is the greatest sporting event in the world.

Q. You guys have had an insane number of injuries and guys in and out, in and out. I was struck when the five players were there, probably five of your six guys who started the most are here, are relatively healthy.

With that group and the bench you have, even though it's



been a long path to get there, do you feel like you're where you want to be now entering this as best as you can be?

MARK POPE: We're exactly where we want to be. We're a 3 seed in this tournament, playing a great team on Friday night. It's the best. It's what you work for all year long and what you work for your whole life is to have a chance to come here and compete in this tournament.

We have great guys, a group that's really together and, you know, we're going to expect and get out of them everything that they have to give us. It's going to be all the drama that we can possibly ask for. We're exactly where we want to be.

Q. Mark, every year in this tournament, the double-digit seeds pull off the upsets. How valuable is it to have Ansley Almonor who was on a 16 seed that took out a 1 seed and what advice has he been able to give?

MARK POPE: I'm glad we're not playing against him. He's done that once.

It's the beauty of a team. It's what's great about a team is a team is like a marriage, right, or like a family in that you don't benefit just from your own experience, but you benefit from all the guys' experience on your team.

Certainly, Ansley walked in with a ton of experience. Not just one NCAA Tournament game, but a slew of experience in life, on the court, and battling and perspective.

So we're grateful to have him, just like we're grateful to have every guy on our team.

Q. Mark, what was your go-to order at Kopp's back in the day? What do you remember about your time with the Bucks and living here?

MARK POPE: Can't even think about it. Kopp's, ho boy. Is Kopp's the official food supplier of the event here? It should be. I mean, they should be.

We didn't have a go-to. That was what we loved so much about Kopp's? I lived in an apartment off of Blue Mountain Road. So I would come back from practice and you turn right on Blue Mountain Road and I would literally take a right into this little apartment complex after you pass the Kopp's there.

And at the time, Lee Anne was pregnant with our first born daughter, Ella. I would go by the placard that is probably digital now. At the time, it was one of the things you stuck

up the letters. It would be the custard of the day. I would literally call her as I was driving by. Okay, it's black raspberry. Are we in? Get the yes or no and I would get to decide how many pints we brought home. It's a magical place, man.

Q. Mark, the players were asked earlier kind of what they were doing this time last year when UK played Oakland. I'm curious, this is the maybe the wrong time for reflection. How much thought have you given to the randomness of it all? If UK beats Oakland, there's a good chance you're not here, there was no coaching change, and everything else proceeds different.

MARK POPE: Yep. I have spent zero minutes thinking about that. Thanks for introducing that idea. This what is I know. So two things. I'll give a two-part answer.

One, I've said this over and over and over again. One of the things that brings me and our team so much peace is we really believe God has plans for us. We really do. I don't know exactly how all the levers get pulled and what part all that plays, but I just believe there's plans for all of us. I really do. I'm a really faithful person that way. I really believe that.

I'm not saying that, you know, our efforts are for naught. I'm just saying there's plans for us. And we believe that. We believe that we're all here together in this locker room for a reason. And the fun part is discovering why. We believe that we're here at this NCAA Tournament for a reason. And the fun part for us is going to be to discover why. And that's really important to us.

The second part is with kind of the randomness that you mentioned, whatever, we try to spend zero time thinking about that. Our job is to be focused exactly on our job at hand. We all get distracted. We all do. But the best competitors are guys that manage to take most of their energy and focus on the job at hand. And we have a massive task at hand Friday night. We know it. We're excited about it.

Q. I asked my listeners to give me a question they wanted me to ask. One person wrote the same question 17 times.

MARK POPE: Here we go.

Q. I felt like I needed to ask. They said their favorite thing from you is when you break down a team and they haven't heard you break down Troy yet. As a coach, could you break down Troy?

MARK POPE: Troy is a championship team. That's the

greatness of the NCAA Tournament. Everybody in here is a championship or a championship-caliber team.

Troy, the numbers scream out at you, which everybody in BBN already knows the numbers. Our fan base, you talk about the most educated fan base on the planet, it's really humbling and beautiful.

Troy's the number 7 steals team in the country. They're the number 6 offensive rebounding team in the country. To put it in perspective, in the SEC, the best conference in the country by a mile, the only team that we played that was more effective on the offensive glass in the entire league was Texas A&M in a league that prides itself on being on the offensive glass.

That's how potent this Troy team is on the glass.

They're very much in the genre of Missouri in terms of having a multitude of changing defenses that they use all the time. They have anywhere between 3 and 5 kind of zone attacks, some full court pressure, some three court to court pressure, different ways that they guard in man.

They're really, really disruptive. They have a point guard who is really special, the conference player of the year. And for BBN, you'll know the name Chucky Hepburn, and he's very similar to Chucky. He's a rover on defense. He breaks every defensive rule, and he's one of the leading steals guys in the country.

In fact, in three of his last five games, he's had five steals a game in three of his last five. That's a ridiculous number. It's incredible. He does it by breaking all the rules. They have bigs that really, really shoot the ball.

They're dangerous. Their starting 5 two games ago was 5 for 8 from the 3-point line. He's shooting up. Their starting 4 is a guy who will run off staggers, run off screens, run underneath out of bounds actions for him to get 3s. They're inside-out. Their bigs are really dangerous shooters.

I expect they're going to be by a multitude of ten times more physical than you might think they are on film. I think they'll be one of the most physical teams we've played.

They're really interesting because you'll see this dichotomy. The first night we watched a bunch of film. In the morning, we started digging into the numbers. They walk the ball up after makes. They walk it up after makes. We go to their Synergy page, and 18.3 or 18.7 of their possessions are transition, which rivals Alabama. I was so shocked. I was like whoa, hold on. This team doesn't feel like Alabama at all.

Sure enough, after missing and after steals, they manufacture so much in transition. It's a really good team. It's well put together. It's incredibly well coached by Scott. He does a great job. It's going to be a real challenge for us. I can keep going if you want me to. 17 questions, I gave a little longer answer.

Q. What, if anything, has Lamont kind of shared with his teammates these last few days in what it takes to make the kind of deep run that he made with San Diego State?

MARK POPE: Lamont's so beautiful. He's a quiet, confident leader. So he doesn't have to say a whole lot. But when he talks, the whole team listens. I think Lamont would echo exactly the same thing that we're saying. It's just like, hey, this is all about us just being as nondistractable as possible, about focusing on the moment. That gives you the best chance to have success. He definitely leads by example in that way.

Q. Seems like when you struggle, you lose the shot volume game by a lot. How can you minimize winning the shot volume game and also potentially winning the shot quality game?

MARK POPE: The glass is going to be a major factor in that. That would be number one. Protecting the ball, number two. We've been one of the most effective ball protection teams in the country for the most part. This will really test us.

We've been actually one of the best defensive rebound teams in the country. We have an opportunity to get on the offensive glass. We'll have to find a way to find some space there. And then the pace of play is really important for us.

The pace of play is something that we were excellent at in the first couple months of the season. And then with a lot of changes, we had to kind of stay above water a little bit. But we would love to find a way to find some pace in this game as consistently as we can.

Q. Mark, as a player in '96, you know exactly what it takes to navigate all six games for a title. As a player in '95, you may have had the best team and fell way short. How do both experiences enable you to communicate to your team what it takes?

MARK POPE: You bring up all the memories. That North Carolina Elite Eight game will haunt me forever, courtesy of Coach P, who tortured us for the next year.

But it worked. I think, you know, listen, I love data points. You guys know I dig into data points. I dig it. But in terms of those things, it just brings me back to the same old boring habits. It's the same old thing. March is a magical time and March Madness is real. And you can't control everything.

What you can lean into is your focus. If Coach P, who led us through both of those -- he led us through the disastrous Elite Eight game against North Carolina, and then led us to the championship in the Meadowlands. It's his ability to focus. His ability to focus on right now and not be distracted by any of the stuff.

That doesn't guarantee wins all the time. It doesn't. But it gives you the best chance and we're pretty good at that. We're pretty good at staying focused and locked in.

I have a lot of confidence in our guys. I'm blessed that I get to coach guys that I believe in, that are unbelievably talented basketball players that are really, really tied together. That are prepared for the moment when the big moment comes. They've shown that over and over again this season. My job gets really easy because I have so much faith in our guys.

Q. Two-parter about Jaxson. Number one, what can he bring for you guys or contribute since, obviously, he's not playing. Number two, when this season is over, whenever that may be, and he is headed to the Pros, what is an NBA team that drafts him, what do they get in him?

MARK POPE: Jaxson Robinson is an unbelievable leader and unbelievable translator for our team. He's a great motivator. He's a guy with quiet confidence. He adds those things to our team even today when he can't step on the floor.

What NBA teams will get is an elite, elite, elite shooter who is growing in his game, has tremendous length. With the right match-up, he can be an unbelievable defensive player, have a huge impact on the game with his length.

A guy who's been through it, who has dealt with misfortune, who has dealt with weeks and months where he's had to sit on the bench when he's young and kind of worked his way through that. He's a really incredibly resilient guy, a guy that will blend in beautifully in a locker room.

He's a guy any NBA team would want to have in their locker room as a rookie because he's got an unbelievable upside. He's going to grow into a great player. Those games as a young player where he was spending most of

his time watching, he's going to be an incredible asset to a team. He's a winner's winner's winner. He's a special guy.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, good luck tomorrow night.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

