

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

Friday, March 21, 2025
Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA
Fiserv Forum

Kentucky Wildcats
Mark Pope
Brandon Garrison
Collin Chandler
Otega Oweh
Media Conference

Kentucky 76, Troy 57

THE MODERATOR: So we are scheduled to have an opening statement by Kentucky coach Mark Pope. There might be a change in plans. Collin Chandler.

COLLIN CHANDLER: Today was a great battle. We prepared very well for this team. This Troy team was very good. They came out and did what we thought they were going to do. I thought we did a good job in the first half of containing them on the offensive glass.

The second half, it got away from us a bit, but we responded very well as a team. We stayed very connected as a team. The leaders on our team that have been here before helped us to come together. It was a great team effort and a great first win this year.

MARK POPE: That was really impressive. Give it up for Collin, please.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the Kentucky student-athletes, please.

Q. This is for Collin and Otega. Your teammate sitting to the right of you evidently has a very short memory. Comes out, shoots an air ball his first shot. But as Coach Pope says, it's so important to be resilient.

Can you talk about how important that aspect is, to be able to rebound and come back from something like that?



OTEGA OWEH: It's huge. Coach tells us every day, we're going to keep on shooting our shot regardless of what happens. He has confidence in all of us. When you're a basketball player, that's something you love and something you need. You have a short-term memory when it comes to this stuff. BG had an air ball, responded perfectly, had a great game. So that shows what we do here. We just keep on playing.

COLLIN CHANDLER: We know what we're going to get out of BG. Make shots, miss shots. It doesn't matter. He does the controllables very well. His energy is great every game. He's rebounding and defending the things you can control. We know what we're getting out of BG every night.

Q. Collin, can you walk us through the whole journey it's been for you this year, coming off the mission trip, having not played, to where you are now? Do you think you're ahead of schedule? Is there more to come? What do you think?

COLLIN CHANDLER: I don't know if there's a schedule. You come back, and I didn't know what to expect. There's been ups and downs and setbacks, but it's been a great learning lesson this whole year of patience and trusting myself and trusting God and his plan for me.

So it's going to continue to be that way, I'm sure. I don't know if there's a schedule, but I know I'm right where I need to be right now so I'm here to contribute and help the team as best I can.

MARK POPE: It's been super cool to watch Otega and Collin together. Otega is Collin's biggest cheerleader. Like his big brother. Collin makes a good play, Otega is the first one to run over and dap him up and hype him up. Collin makes a young play, and Otega's the first to say it's okay. Having mentors on the team and these two together is pretty special for us.

Q. What's it been like watching him? The trust level has had to grow throughout the year, and he's gotten into the groove. What it's been like?

OTEGA OWEH: It's been great. I feel like he's exactly where he's supposed to be. Every day in practice, we work out together, like we're on the same basket. So I'm seeing,



like, everything that he's doing and knowing like he's really trusting his work and doing everything that he works on. It's great seeing it.

We're at that point of the year where freshmen aren't freshmen no more. He's not a freshman no more. He's not playing like a freshman. I'm happy to see him succeed. Every time he contributes, it makes us better.

Q. Brandon, I'll ask you. Collin and Otega chime in too. I know Coach Pope will try to deflect. To be able to get him his first NCAA win, how important is that and what are your thoughts?

BRANDON GARRISON: It's important. Coach Pope is a very special individual. He trusted us three to bring us on the team this year. When we first got there, all the talks me and him had, it was just special get being him his first tournament win.

COLLIN CHANDLER: I'm sure it's the first of many. It's fun to celebrate and be part of it with Coach Pope. It's the first of many for him. We're grateful to be part of the first one.

MARK POPE: I'm grateful that BG can't walk around calling me The Big Zero anymore.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, thanks very much. Good luck Sunday.

Questions for Coach Pope, please.

Q. Mark, the journey for Collin, the frustrating moments and where he is now, can you walk us through that?

MARK POPE: Yeah. I'm going to not be overstated. I'll try to understate this. But it is the best part of coaching. The best part of coaching is watching guys that are super committed and a ton of talent and a great work ethic and watching the process of them realize themselves a little bit.

Here he is on the biggest stage he's ever been on in his entire life in a high-pressure game with a bunch of teammates that are hanging on by a thread health-wise. He's like, guys, I'm ready to go get this.

What we don't see along the way, and this is super special to me, but we don't see all along the way are the quiet moments in his -- in the Wildcat Lodge where he's by himself wondering if this is ever going to work, and did he make the right decision.

Or the time he rolls out of a game, and the team has won a

huge, huge game and he didn't get to play so he's battling within himself the emotion of I have to celebrate with my team, and I'm dying inside that I'm not contributing.

It's just this beautiful process that these guys get to go through, and the guys that keep going, that keep going, that keep going, like Collin Chandler, they get this moment. And he's got so many more moments ahead of him. He's going to be a terrific player.

To be able to kind of bear witness to that and mentor and help these guys through this process is special. The guys that hang in there and keep going at the end of the road mean something more than any of us probably recognize because we weren't in all those dark, doubting moments that the player's gone through to kind of get there.

And fighting to keep your confidence and the whole process, I love it. It's super inspiring. That's why I'm talking about it so much.

Q. Mark, I know you know BBN --

MARK POPE: Everybody knows who you are.

Q. I know you know BBN enough to know what they're like. I felt like there was a lot of tension around the fan base because of what happened in the early games the last couple years that had nothing to do with you all.

When the game is out there, you have a high seed against a low seed, you want to play loose and not have that pressure. When it's 25-24 and staying close, how do you make sure your guys are like that? Then they went on a run. So they don't start feeling like oh, no, is this happening?

MARK POPE: It's a battle all of us face and never totally win. We talk about being present all the time, but that's a battle. It's not something you do 100 percent. It's every single minute, you're trying to talk yourself off a ledge. For me also. I'm fighting so hard to keep bringing myself back to not taking on the magnitude of the history and all the things that are just too big. They all turn out to be distractions.

I'll compliment my staff. Mikhail McLean grabbed me yesterday and didn't cuss me out, but he settled me down. He's like, Coach, we've had more time to prepare than we normally have. We're too much in the weeds. You've got to breathe right now, and we're going to be good. Just be in this moment.

That's how a team works together. That's how a staff works together. And so it's a constant battle. I was really

proud of our guys being able to just kind of lose themselves in this moment. We talked about it before the game, three things. It's true for all the guys. There's nowhere in the world they would have rather been than to be right here tonight. There is nothing they would have rather been doing than playing in this game tonight. And there's nobody in the world they'd rather be doing it with than these guys on this team.

When you have -- those moments are rare. Like if I sat anybody down and said, you know, tell me exactly your dream scenario, where you'd like to be, what you'd like to be doing, and who you'd like to be doing it with, it happens very rarely that you're actually in it with them doing it.

And so I thought our guys did a wonderful job tonight about being fully present and understanding this is everything we want. Why would we want to miss it? Why would we want the game to get over? Why would we want to avoid it? Why would we want to fast-forward to a post-game press conference after a win?

Be here. I thought our guys did a good job with that.

Q. Mark, two of the three guys up here came off the bench. Trent Noah could have been. Talk about -- is unsung heroes the right word? But the contribution from the guys who didn't start the game.

MARK POPE: They were important. I thought one of the biggest plays of the game was Trent's first 3. It really mattered. It was a great play by Amari out of a tech set. Just to see it, Otega kind of broke his cut and went down the middle and sucked it in. They're kind of coming from us anyway, and the skip pass was really terrific. I thought he had a huge impact. He was solid defensively. TP played solid minutes. Collin, of course, was spectacular.

BG, I'm telling you guys, he's going to turn into a really, really special -- all these guys will turn into really special players. But our roster right now is in tatters, and these guys are doing this just on sheer love for each other and will in terms of guys' health right now. There's so much going on.

These guys coming off the bench are massively important. If we're going to have a chance in 48 hours, they'll be just as important. Clearly, they've proven they're ready to step up and do it.

Q. Mark, 23 assists on 28 field goals. Coaches want that. What allowed you to do that tonight?

MARK POPE: It was ball protection. It was guys being diligent about being aggressive. It has to do with being

super aggressive. The Troy defense is terrific. They're a great defensive team. They're incredibly disruptive. They're the number 7 steals team in the country. They're really disruptive, changing defenses all the time. Everything from 1-3 to a 3-2 to a tandem zone to a press to, you know, to 12 being a rover and running around and making unconventional defensive plays.

So the first thing is our guys being really aggressive. We were aggressive to two feet. They were trying to make a place for their teammates. Against a team that's disruptive, aggressive like that, that's actually the recipe and our guys answered the bell really well.

Ton of credit to Troy, though. A great team that's had a great season. Scott does an unbelievable job. Those guys fought like crazy. They're a really, really, really good team. They're a terrific team.

Q. What's it like coaching in a city you played in and obviously earning your first NCAA win here for Kentucky?

MARK POPE: If you indulge me, I'll give you a short long answer. I love this city. Lee Ann and I, like, really in a lot of ways began our life here. My oldest daughter, Ella, was born here. I got to play for George Karl on one of the best Bucks' teams in the last 30, 40 years with incredible teammates I love so much.

I was a terrible player so I was a guest on the team, but it was special. And I think about, if you'll let me, I think about this Milwaukee tradition that I got to be part of. Super important to me.

Junior Bridgeman, who is a legend here and also a legend in the state of Kentucky, he passed away just a few days ago, and I don't know if there's a better representative in the world of what you can -- on the trajectory that basketball can set you in for the rest of your life.

I talk to my guys all the time about, man, I hope every one of you plays in the NBA, and I hope it's like the tenth most interesting thing you do in your life, the tenth most meaningful thing you do in your life.

You talk about great human beings, Junior Bridgeman very special. I know everybody in Milwaukee and the state of Kentucky is mourning his loss.

It means a lot to be able to be here. We still haven't got any Kopp's custard, and I'm disappointed we haven't made that happen yet, but we have other business. Milwaukee and the Bucks are special to us. To be here and be competing is pretty great.



Q. To piggyback off that, I know it's going to take you time to process this, but what does it mean to get your first NCAA Tournament win with Kentucky with this group?

MARK POPE: Well, it means that Mitch is not going to fire me until Saturday or Sunday or whenever we play next.

Lee Ann and Shay and I and our family have this unimaginable opportunity to come try and do our best to represent this 1-of-1 program for us. That means a lot to us, the opportunity to do it. The trick it's not about us at all. It's just not. It's not. So I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it.

I spend a lot of time thinking about our guys, where this is their one shot to do this. Most of our guys wearing a Kentucky jersey. And I think about BBN, and it means -- when you understand how much it means to our fans and this community, that's the stuff that's really important to us. It just, you know, we just are blessed to have a chance to be here and do everything we can to help it work.

With that said, talk about this BBN community, I heard this. Am I allowed to say this? So you think about tough things. The great Vernon Hatton, he's a legend, all-time legend at University of Kentucky. He passed away just before the game. I just heard that after the game.

I had a chance to go spend some time with him a couple weeks ago, and maybe we spent -- Mark Hill and I got to go. I don't know if we spent an hour with him and listened to stories. I could have spent day after day after day. What an amazing trailblazer he is and a great member of the BBN community and what a great legendary basketball player he was. He was also a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was a trailblazer in the game of basketball for me and Kentucky in that way.

It's just an example. I mean, he just is a beautiful human being and gave so much to this state and this community. So we'll mourn his loss also. That's BBN. There's a whole lot of goodness.

Q. Mark, I apologize. I know you've hated all these questions about the first win as a UK coach. A bigger picture look, does winning an NCAA game as a coach, does it feel any different than all the victories you had as a player with Coach Pitino?

MARK POPE: Sorry I'm giving you terrible answers. I wish I had something for you. It means something to me because we're doing our job. It means something to me and to the guys because that means we get at least 48

hours more together.

When this comes to an end -- hopefully it doesn't come to an end for three more weeks. When it does, it's going to be super painful for me because I get to be around these incredibly special guys that have literally given everything under massive duress. And what these guys have overcome just trying to actually get on to the court is pretty special. So we're trying to do this as long as we can.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Congratulations. Good luck.

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