

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Illinois vs Kentucky

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Fiserv Forum

## Kentucky Wildcats

## Coach Mark Pope

Media Conference



MODERATOR: Questions for Coach, please.

**Q. Coach, you and Brad Underwood kind of the same situation. You were faced with a complete roster overhaul. Looks like two gleaming success stories about how to do this on short notice. Losing an entire roster would have been devastation years ago. How were you able to find success in doing that roster overhaul that way?**

MARK POPE: A roster overhaul is just -- it's really interesting because it's a terrifying process especially as a first year coach. It's an incredible opportunity also. The terrifying part is that you have zero players on your roster and you're expected to go win huge, right. The exciting part is that you get to start from scratch and kind of really hand select every single piece to try and fit together, and so there's no -- you're not forcing any square pegs into round holes.

I think it's one of the challenges of coaching now that I find incredibly exciting and challenging and dynamic, and we'll see how it goes over the course of time. But this year, it's been really fun for us, and we were really blessed to put together a group of guys that are great players and even better people. It's what makes it so fun. And so we're hoping that we can run it back over and over and over again. We'll see how that goes.

**Q. Mark, a lot of your players have described your positivity as a coach. Some of them it's not something they've been used to with some previous coaches. Where do you think that comes from? Why is that an important aspect in putting a team together and building them up?**

MARK POPE: Shay would be like my dad is not positive. He grounded me last week. Is that true?

SHAY: I am grounded.

MARK POPE: You didn't have to answer.

So I don't know that I have a great answer for you. I think that I've had the greatest mentors in all of basketball. I mean, I've been exposed to the greatest coaches from my high school coach Rich Belcher to my first college coach, Lynn Nance, to Rick Pitino to the great Larry Bird, and along the way Billy Donovan and a whole slew of incredible coaches. I'm leaving out 25 coaches that have been so great. I got to work for Dave Rose at BYU which was one of my great teachers and mentors. I've been really blessed.

I think that my life view, most of it comes from my faith. And I'm a believer. And that makes -- it just makes you see the world different. It really does. I think the world is -- I think it's actually real that the world is what we see and what we look for. I think that we are active creators in the world that we live in. I mean, I really believe that. I believe that if we really want to see the goodness of the world, if we work hard, we can see it. I really believe we can see it. Right?

I think that my faith is -- a foundational principle is gratitude, and I think it's really hard to not be positive, not be joyful, not be happy if you work really hard at gratitude. I mean, if we all take the time in our day to sit down and start listing the things that we could be grateful for, starting from the very basic level, how can we not love life and be so incredibly full of joy and positivity. Because it's just miracle after miracle, just the fact that we get to wake up every morning.

I'm giving you a long answer because I actually love this. I believe in this. You guys have heard this kind of story of if I gave you \$10 million right now, would it make you happy? And most people would be like, yeah, I would take that in a second. No strings attached. Are you kidding?

And if I said well, here's the deal. If I was going to give you \$10 million today or you could wake up tomorrow, which would you choose? And you would choose to wake up tomorrow, right?

So waking up tomorrow is worth way more than \$10 million. That's a fact, and it's a reality. It's just sometimes we don't actually take the time to look at it and understand it that way. And when we actively do that, I think our lives get really, really good really, really fast.

So I think that I want my guys to be challenged. I want them to face all of the struggles and trials and adversity that this game and this experience can offer them, because it gives them a chance to grow. But I also want them every single day to remember how blessed they are to have the opportunity to wake up, to be basketball players at the University of Kentucky. It's just incredible.

So I don't know. I love it, man. I love the whole thing, and it's not hard. It's not hard to find joy in life.

**Q. Bear with me a second. All the years I covered John Calipari at Kentucky, you could count on 6'3" point guards. I remember asking him why break something that works for 5'9" Tyler Ulis? He said because he has the heart of a lion. Correct me if I'm wrong, please. When I look at you guys if I was to build a player, I'm thinking three-point shooter extraordinaire, great passing, so on and so on. Your roster, the one guy who doesn't fit but clearly works is Otega. Is that right. Why would you be drawn to him?**

MARK POPE: Otega is shooting 36 percent from the three-point line right now. He's pretty good, right? I think Otega is -- you know, I would probably echo -- I think every coach in America would echo the same thing, and that is that certainly we want to find players that have certain capabilities and attributes that fill certain areas of the stats sheet, that have certain skill level. But when it comes down to the game, the game gets way simpler.

You know, I'm going to let you guys in on a little secret. None of us coaches are really rocket scientists, right? You gotta go really guard, you gotta really rebound the ball, and you gotta share it. And it probably doesn't get a lot more technical than that.

But you have to have guys that want to show up every single day, that'll show up every single day to work. Otega Oweh, if you think about his greatest skill, I mean from a statistical space -- like that you can grab the data you can grab -- he lasted longer than any player in all of power four conferences in terms of being consistent every single game and being a double-figure scorer without me running actions for him or him getting a ton of extra shots.

So the fact that he brings it every single day and wants to compete every single day, that's probably more important than any of the things that I might list on a sheet.

Conveniently for us, he's doing all the things that you list on the sheet also. I mean, yesterday he was a six assist guy in a game where a really good Troy team -- the reason they're really good is because they're so disruptive and so disorienting and so confusing with how they guard. And here Otega Oweh is just leading us in assists. So he's been brilliant all those ways.

**Q. I know you're a philosophical person. You're in uncharted territory going into a second-round game in the NCAA Tournament. How have you personally approached the past 12 hours and how are you going to approach the next 12?**

MARK POPE: Our life gets really simple right now. Last night we Doug in a scout, kind of stayed there all night. This morning met with the team, digging in on a scout this afternoon, had a really nice experience with our guys on the floor, and we'll go back and keep trying to figure out this terrific Illinois team.

So in that sense, it gets really, really simple. It's one of the best parts of this year aside from recruiting, which is constantly ongoing right now. Everything else is just focused on the game. So it gets simple.

Dave Rose, I was really blessed to work for him and learn from him, and he talked about the blue dots on his calendar, that during the summer, he'd have like a hundred blue dots every single day. And then as the season -- as you started getting into postseason, all of a sudden all the blue dots are gone and it's just hoops. So it's actually a fun time.

**Q. Mark, how did the early season neutral site games particularly playing Seattle and Gonzaga help you prepare for tomorrow where I'm assuming it's going to be a majority Illinois crowd?**

MARK POPE: We were really blessed. The Gonzaga game was essentially a neutral road game. So it will feel like the game will feel tomorrow. We played Duke in Atlanta, it's Catlanta, so it was all Kentucky fans.

But we've also had great road games. At Tennessee is a great environment. At Mississippi State is a great environment. So our guys have been through this. We're really blessed to have a really experienced lineup that feel this, and I think they love it. We went and played at Missouri in a great environment, and we kind of -- our guys lead a lot of the pregame speeches. And so we got to the point it was -- well, I gotta be careful with what I say.

But there is that part, there is that real joy that you get from being in the gym and the gym getting really, really quiet.

And our guys know that feeling, and relish the opportunity to do that. And that will probably be part of what our job is tomorrow.

**Q. Coach, when I spoke to Jackson the other day, he said he's not playing, but he's taken on more of a leadership role. How have you seen him kind of grow in that role helping with the younger guys? Like Collin Chandler had a great game yesterday.**

MARK POPE: Jackson, what an incredible young man he is. Such an amazing talent. It hurts me even to utter his name because I think about what could be happening right now. But what's really exciting is probably something bigger. It's actually probably better because Jackson is becoming -- he had already become a great basketball player. He'd already become a really resilient person. And now he's taking on a leadership/coaching role on this team where he's not just talking to our players, but he's coming up and talking to me.

It was two games ago, all of a sudden, I'm standing on the sideline and I got someone tapping me on the shoulder during live play and I turn around. He's like, Coach, you're not seeing this right. He gave me a couple of pointers. And it's -- Jackson has a father. He's got a mom and dad and aunt, the greatest family in the world. But to be one of those people that gets to up close watch him grow as a man and as a leader, it actually means more than probably anything, and he's doing that. And it's incredible to watch.

Like he's so different than the person he was three years ago. He's different as a human being. Like he's different in how he sees the world. He's different in how he takes in all this information and how he's able to respond to it. It's like the best thing ever.

And so it was startling to have him come tap me on the shoulder, but like it's pretty cool. The problem is he was right, and then I'm like, man, he might be a better coach than me. And then you have all these personal complexes and the whole thing.

**Q. With so few upsets in the first round, what do you make of this matchup among kind of the incredible slate today and tomorrow?**

MARK POPE: How fun is this? I mean, it's so fun. Like it's just great. Every game is a great game against great teams and great coaches. This event is awesome. And it's a special time to be a part of it.

**Q. Coach, the folks here in Milwaukee have been great, but they kind of did you dirty making you practice and have your press conference right in the**

**middle of St. John's and Arkansas. You talk about your respect for Coach Cal and of your love for Pitino. What were your thoughts on that?**

MARK POPE: It's what you want from March. You want the drama. You want the smoke. You want the headlines. It's a fun part of it. And I love that part. As a coach and as a player, you're kind of silencing all those things and you're just staying focused on the moment. But you're also like -- we're also all fans, you know.

Like I love it just as much as everybody else. I love the drama. I can't wait to see what happens. I can't wait to see the post game press conference, you know. And it's just we're all blessed by this game. We're all blessed by this incredible event of the NCAA Tournament. So I love every bit of it.

**Q. Mark, you described last night the roster being in tatters. I'm just wondering as a coach how impressed have you been with Lamont, Amari, all these guys gutting things out, especially Lamont's case. Also how much do you think they're motivated just by the bond they've built together?**

MARK POPE: Man, you say -- like you even bringing up Lamont's name, like fighting to play right now, I have an emotional reaction. Like I feel it physically.

When we first brought Lamont in, we knew -- I didn't know him, but I had played against him every year and watched him and studied him. Because you study these guys so deep in a scout. And we've said this since the day we started recruiting him, he's just a winner, a winner.

And right now he is -- there's probably zero reason why he should be able to be on the court right now, and he's just gutting it out, man. He's doing it for his team.

I don't know if I've coached a player that is more determined and like more like of his soul is just -- it will kill him to let down his guys. Like it'll kill him. Like it'll bring him to tears, like to ugly tears, even the thought of letting down his guys.

And so you have someone like that in your locker room and you get someone like that on the court, and it's pretty special. And I think he's actually -- I actually think he's going to be amazing tomorrow. It's just how this game works. It's how it rewards you, and it's incredible that he's on the floor right now. I'm really proud of him.

**Q. Circling back to Otega. Early in the year, one of his big games you said sometimes I have to close my eyes and let Otega be Otega. What did you mean by that?**



MARK POPE: We talk about that a lot as a staff. He has an unbelievable makeup ability. He's a rule breaker, but he's capable of breaking rules. And he's also growing his game, and maybe he's growing his game in a nontraditional way. So it's a very literal thing for me.

Sometimes when things go wrong and they're not choreographed exactly the way I draw them up or I designed them or I taught them, I've learned that I just kind gotta like turn away and be you know what? There's going to be something great with him right around the corner. And the reason that I believe that is because he keeps doing it. He keeps doing it over and over.

And the truth is is that he's able to do some things outside of the context of my normal expectation of a player of how they do it. And so I'm working hard to coach Otega, and Otega is also teaching me about what he can do that pushes the boundaries. And there's a give-and-take there. And I love that player-coach relationship. I actually think that's really important.

I don't want him to only paint inside the lines because that gets to be a really boring picture, right? I want him to be respectful and diligent and trusting of the concepts that are winning concepts. But I also want his creativity and his unique athleticism. And that's not just jumping high or running fast, but it's contorting his body and being able to do different things that normally might not be a great play for somebody else. We're both learning together kind of where he can do that consistently and where he can't. And that process is really artistic more than it is scientific, and it's really fun.

I think it's really beautiful and I'm enjoying it, but it does take some restraint because there are times where you're like that just went bad, and if you stayed within the confines that I draw for most guys, it wouldn't happen, but you would also lose out on the things that he can do that surprise me, right? And so it's really fun to work with guys like that.

**Q. With all the maneuvering you all have had to do with the injuries and that kind of thing, is it an oversimplification to say this has been a next-man-up type deal for you all?**

MARK POPE: In a sense, no. But in a sense it's like weaving pieces back together. It's not like a conveyor belt, but it's a beautiful kind of tapestry that we're trying to create. And these guys have been unbelievable doing it and I'm really proud of them.

**Q. Could you talk a little bit about your bigs, especially with the confidence it seems that Brandon**

**has now and how that kind of changes things for you?**

MARK POPE: Yeah. Brandon is, I'm telling you, like he's fun. He's sometimes wrong but never in doubt, and I love that about him. That's what you want your players to be. And he's doing really special things. I mean, his float game has grown to the free throw line. His three-point game is really, really dangerous right now. His decisiveness on turning down decisions to get to the good one. You know, he's a huge, high-level decisionmaker for us.

He's got the ball in his hands. And you guys will see him, if we have three cutters going at the same time, he'll be like a turn down -- a turn down, a turn down and finally choose the right one. And that's advanced level like processing in his mind. He's been really great. Thanks, guys.

MODERATOR: Coach, thank you. Good luck tomorrow.

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