

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Kentucky vs Tennessee

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

## Kentucky Wildcats

## Coach Mark Pope

### Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



**And as a follow-up, as someone who has been here, won the whole thing, how important is that moving forward?**

MARK POPE: I think joy in the gym is a principle that's really, really important to us. I think we play better when we work hard to find joy in the process because this can be a grind also. It can be mentally and emotionally taxing and exhausting. And the pressure can be immense.

But finding the joy in it, I think, actually helps us perform better. It helps us be more focused. I think it helps us be looser. It helps us, enables us to be better decision makers. It takes us from our limbic system to our frontal cortex literally, in a real sense, and helps us be decision makers, which is such a crucial part of what we do on the court.

Also, it is, what's the point? What's the point of all this if you're not building relationships that are going to last forever and if you're not enjoying every moment. If you can't be here in this city in the Sweet 16, with this group of guys, if you can't enjoy that, then you need to find another thing to do.

I love that the guys are enjoying it. And I love that they're taking in every single moment. They came here for a reason. They're very focused on that reason. But their love of each other is showing through is actually a strength for us.

**Q. I understand your rivalry or your series with Indiana University is being renewed next season. What does that rivalry mean to college basketball? And is that something that you guys will look to make permanent moving forward?**

MARK POPE: Am I allowed to talk about this? I assume I am?

So I have such beautiful memories of Kentucky-Indiana in the RCA Dome and looking up in the arena and seeing the aisleway where it was split, where it was all blue/white all across the arena on one side and all red and white on the other side of the stadium.

And I love everything about it. I think these rivalries are

MARK POPE: In random twist of fate, I can't believe I get to sit up here with Bill Benner. Bill and I don't know each other well, but David Benner, his brother, who was one of my favorite people in the world, he passed away, but he was the information director here with the Indiana Pacers for a long time. One of the great human beings on the planet. I love him. So we miss him. I'm happy to be here with you.

We're clearly excited to be here, competing in this incredible venue in this beautiful city in the NCAA Tournament. We're excited about moving forward.

**Q. You referenced your time with the Pacers. What do you remember about Indianapolis? And what did you take from playing for Larry Bird?**

MARK POPE: Come on, I'm the most blessed human being in the world that I got to be here on those great Indiana Pacers teams in this tremendous city, playing for Larry Bird and Rick Carlisle and the whole crew. I'll never forget it.

The Pacers drafted me. It was my first two years here until Coach Bird fired me. And it was two of the most fun, incredible years of my entire life getting to play with these guys, with Reggie and Jack and Chris and the Davis boys, come on, Rik Smits. It just doesn't get any better, in epic contests, in a really tremendous era of basketball.

To do that here in Indianapolis is special to me. This is where I met my wife and we started our life. It's a really special city to me.

**Q. I've noticed in the locker room there's a lot of levity among the players. They're having a lot of fun. How do you think that translates to their game right now?**



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really special in college basketball. I think this rivalry has incredible history. I think it's great for college basketball. There's nothing about it that's not great. I'm really excited about it.

**Q. You guys played Tennessee twice, beat them twice. What advantages do you see for the team that won both of those games this year? And flip side, what the advantages might be for the team that lost both of those games heading into this?**

MARK POPE: If we really parse details, there's certainly, maybe the emotional advantage of winning two that you feel like you know you can. There's the strategic side of coming to know to consider you might have a better idea of, if you're going to make changes, a better idea of how and why.

But I think that's like the .1 percent. I think mostly this is a free-standing game. This is a great Tennessee team. It's one of the top teams in the country. It's the best defensive team in the country. They have one of the best offensive teams in the country.

Rick Barnes is, if not the best, one of the best coaches in all of college basketball right now. He's one of the people that I really, really admire. I admire him because he puts together great teams every year. And I admire him because, everything I know about him, he's a way better man than he is a basketball coach. When you're one of the best basketball coaches that's saying a lot about him.

I think he lives his life by a moral code and a moral compass. And I think he sets an incredible example for the rest of us in the profession. I think he sets a great example for everybody. I don't know what advantage comes from it. I just know it's two great teams playing together in the Sweet 16, trying to get to the Elite Eight. And that's exactly what you would expect at this point in the tournament. We can't wait to get to it.

**Q. First time since '85 that there's been no mid-majors, pretty much all power-conference teams. What's kind of your thoughts, if you could, on just the future, going forward with NIL and revenue sharing? Are the little guys going to be able to win a few games in here like maybe they once were able to?**

MARK POPE: Yes. I mean, I think the answer is yes. We had No. 1 seeds that were one missed shot, one made shot away from going down. So there's been all the drama.

I expect that will continue because the reason is because there are so many talented players. There are so many

incredibly talented players. And there are so many incredibly talented coaches.

I think this tournament is one of the great things in all of sports. And I think it's because it's a pure meritocracy once you start playing. Once you start playing, doesn't matter what your budget is, doesn't matter if you came in on a bus or flew in on a plane. Doesn't matter if you don't have 17 different uniforms or if you have only one. Doesn't matter if you have holes in your shoes or your 75th new pair. I think this incredible event is only going to get better and better.

**Q. Every venue is different when you're playing in the tournament. You were at Fiserv in Milwaukee, built for basketball, built for the Bucks. You're here at Lucas Oil. What's it like practicing and eventually playing in this building?**

MARK POPE: I think it's a great building. One of my coaches, Alvin Brooks, loves this building like no place on the planet because he hoisted a trophy here. I think it's a really special venue.

What's interesting, a lot of times, in the older stadiums you would walk in it would be really, really light. You kind of got caught up in the background. In our first experience in here this morning, the background kind of fades away so it feels a lot more intimate maybe than it is. I think it's an incredible venue. I think it's a special place, and we can't wait to play.

**Q. Have you done anything here since you've been to Indianapolis to make it fun, make it joyful for your players, unusual? And when you played for Coach Pitino, did he do that for you guys?**

MARK POPE: Whoo (laughter). My memory might be a little bit skewed, but I remember we toured Italy. We did a foreign tour with Coach Pitino. And I remember just an insane amount of time in the gym. I do remember at one point, we finished practice, he threw us in a bus -- and we were so exhausted. I think most of us fell asleep. But at one point I do recall we were driving around the coliseum on our way back to the gym to work out again (laughter).

I love that man. I love him.

**Q. Is he here?**

MARK POPE: We got in late last night. We're up early for practice today. The one great thing about our team it's fun listening to them at breakfast. I'm not going to tell you what the whole team was debating about. There was a serious debate about which concerts were appropriate to attend and which weren't as a team. It was delightful.



With this group, we don't have to do a lot of exotic things for these guys to really enjoy the moment and love each other. They've made that great. It feels like you're in a room with 12 brothers that are constantly -- they never stop talking. It's wonderful.

We have talked about, we're pursuing maybe some options to get out of the hotel a little bit this afternoon just because it's a little bit of a longer -- we were early in the morning, so it will be a little longer day. But these guys are pretty fresh all the time.

**Q. Amari talked about sometimes kind of needing physical play early to kind of get him into a flow. Aside from eating warm milk with your cereal with him, what kind of buttons have you had to push to get him really going?**

MARK POPE: One, this whole Weetabix thing has been super fun, man. The videos that we're getting sent to us are really special, sweet and delightful, just B.B. (phonetic) coming through in major fashion.

With Amari, I'll tell you who the most important guy to him is Brandon Garrison. It's pretty fun. Our rhythm is the rest the team goes out early, and B.G. and Amari stay back in the locker room for a minute because they get on the court a second later when we're doing warmups. Those two get each other hyped.

They haven't got to the point where they're getting super physical with each other to kind of awaken him, but maybe we'll start on that. But B.G. is really important to him.

Those two have developed an incredible relationship. Just focusing on the things we do. Those are things we'll spend time with Amari on, is kind of talking about a first hit, a first rebound, talking about being really, really aggressive downhill to two feet early on in the game.

He's been so incredibly good for us. He really is a generational guy right now in his own unique niche in the game. He's been really special.

**Q. Kentucky's the standard for basketball in this league. You've been away a few years. I'm sure you followed the league, followed Kentucky. What's happened to the SEC this year to the point they've gotten all these teams in?**

MARK POPE: Well, I can't give you a really insightful answer on that because I haven't been here. But like you said. But I do think it's pretty great. It's the first time the league's ever had 14 teams in. It's the first time a league

has had seven teams in the Sweet 16. It's just been a magical, brutal, beautiful year in the SEC.

We'll still see how that pans out as we move forward. But you want to be in the most competitive league. There's no doubt. I mean, it's really remarkable what this league has been. And it's been a blessing to all of us. It's been painful for all of us, too. That's what you want.

**Q. You've emphasized all year the importance of the players kind of keeping the even keel, not getting too high, not getting too low, keeping their emotions in check. How do you feel like they've done? And along the same lines, there have been some coaches, Rick Pitino included, who have advocated for eliminating the postgame handshake line. I didn't know if you had any strong feelings one way or the other about that.**

MARK POPE: I do. It's because I'm a terrible sport. I advocate that we shut down the handshake line when I lose and that we do it when I win. (Laughter).

I'm a bad loser, guys. I'm trying. I'm trying so hard. I got a whole psychology team that's trying to help me do it better. Hopefully we don't do it a lot.

I think that we all have moments where we feel like why are we doing this and those are probably not our best moments. At the end of the day, I do think that athletics -- I hope that athletics is about more -- it can be deadly serious about winning, which it is. Like, we're deadly serious about winning. And it can also be more.

And the "more" part, you think the deadly winning part is exhausting and taxing, it is, because it takes every ounce of everything that you are as a human being, because you're competing against guys that are giving every ounce of everything, sacrificing everything that they have, to win. So sometimes to ask for more seems impossible.

But the one great thing about athletes is they're chasing the impossible. So can we be the most vicious, competitive, fighting people in the world and fight tooth and nail with every ounce of what we have to find a way to win? And then can we do more?

Then can we actually, like, be man enough to walk through a line and teach our guys to walk through a line that we don't want to walk through, the guys we don't want to shake their hands and do it out of the camaraderie of sports? That's a tall order. But I like tall orders.

And I like us being more than -- if we're going to do this great, guys, we're going to win and win at the highest level and we're going to do a little bit more. That's just one little

way that I think we can do a little bit more.

I'd like to be mature enough -- and I'm not -- I'd like to be mature enough to keep chasing bigger and more important things than even just basketball.

**Q. Overcoming injuries has been a theme of this season. I know you talked about not sleeping a few nights before games. Could you talk about how that's defined and forged this team to help them get to that point? Maybe touch a little bit on Lamont and what he's gone through to play here.**

MARK POPE: Every experience we have, good or bad, our goal is to make it a learning, teaching experience, is how can it grow us? My staff is so good about refocusing me and saying, okay, relax, take a breath, how can this grow us? How can this grow us? How can this grow us?

For sure the injuries for us have been really painful. It's been problematic for us and giving us incredible challenges, but what's exciting about it is how it's grown us.

I think it's grown us in a lot of ways. It's giving young guys a chance to come up and play, giving guys a chance to play in different positions with different responsibilities. It's made us really rethink everything that we went into the season expecting to do. We don't talk about the loss of Kerr Kriisa very much, but it changed entirely the way we were planning to approach the game. That's an afterthought in the slough of the injuries we've gone through. It gives you an opportunity to really grow and really become better coach and a better player, and I think our guys have taken advantage of it and we'll continue to be tested in that way.

But adversity is a gift. Adversity is a beautiful thing. But really the death of me is going to be when I'm sitting on a beach somewhere just drinking a nonalcoholic beverage and have no adversity because then how are you growing? What are you becoming? I think we're obsessed with becoming something, like how can we find a way to get better. And these injuries have certainly played a part in us trying to do that.

**Q. (Question about Lamont).**

MARK POPE: I've talked about Lamont a lot. It's a beautiful thing as a coach, just like a beautiful thing as a parent -- as a parent, when you see your children doing things better than you ever did them and being smarter than you ever were and doing things that are so brave and so bold, we all know what that feels like. That's how I feel about Lamont Butler. He's doing things that you just shouldn't have to ask a player to do.

And he's never been dissuaded. He's never been diverted or distracted from his, like, core, which is like he wants to raise up and do this for his guys. He's doing it at insane cost right now and with unbelievable bravery and unbelievable fortitude and gratitude.

That's why I love sports. I talk about sports, does it give us a chance to do something even more? We have to do the winning, but can you win and actually do something more than winning? And Lamont Butler, if there's a guy that's been symbolic of that on this team, you talk about a guy winning and doing more, it's Lamont Butler. He's really special.

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