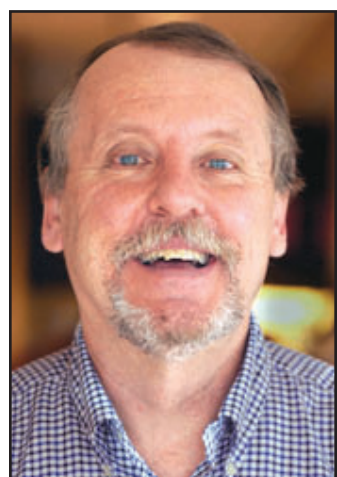


# The journey from Nigeria to UK



by Larry Vaught

One of the more unique football recruiting stories has to be Abule Abadi-Fitzgerald and his journey from Nigeria to the University of Kentucky.

Steve Fitzgerald has been a high school basketball coach in Florida for 20 plus years. He once helped a friend find a school for a Nigerian basketball player who had been in school in Miami only to have the school shut down.

"The next time my friend went to look for kids to come to the U.S. to play basketball, he found a couple and contacted me," said Fitzgerald.

Abule Abadi-Fitzgerald was not a basketball player when he came to Florida as a 12-year-old, sixth-grade student. He came to Florida along with two other Nigerians who intended to play basketball.

"His dad was a politician and helped fund camps to bring kids to the U.S. He wanted Abule to get a better education," Fitzgerald said. "Abule was with a host family but it was not ideal for him. They all started spending more time with us. Because I was a coach, he could not live with us even though he was already like part of the family."

The Fitzgeralds already had six biological children ranging in age now from 10 to 21. They were all in favor of going through the adoption process for Abule. The adoption of their first son from Nigeria became official in 2012 while Abule's adoption became official in 2013.

"We can't remember a time now that he was not part of our family," Fitzgerald said. "Having kids from another culture, they are so appreciative of everything here because where they came from everything was not easy or great."

He was tall — 6-2 — when he came to the United States. But he was no basketball star.

"He was uncoordinated

when he got here. He couldn't shoot or dribble," Fitzgerald said. "A huge part of what makes him special is he is self-made athlete. By seventh grade, he was a good player. He has huge hands and was athletic enough after a month or two of getting his coordination he could actually dunk as a sixth-grader."

Abadi-Fitzgerald is now 6-6, 240 pounds. He's scored over 1,000 points in his basketball career at three schools playing for his adopted father. He's a low-post player primarily but can play on the perimeter at times.

"He got lower level (Division 1) interest but his size scared off a lot of big-time schools," Fitzgerald said. "He just decided football was his ticket to take him further."

Fitzgerald says he doubts Abadi-Fitzgerald knew anything about Kentucky or that it had a good basketball team when coach Mark Stoops and his staff recruited him.

"All along in the process he was really sort of mature and had an idea what he wanted," Fitzgerald said. "Not knowing a lot about college football, he just wanted the best fit for him. The way the program looked nationally really was not a deciding factor to him. He just wanted to be comfortable with the staff and players and be able to get a good education."

He played just two seasons (freshman and senior years) of high school football. He had 24 tackles, two sacks and 13 quarterback hurries last season at Victory Christian Academy. Stoops praised Abadi-Fitzgerald's potential and willingness to learn.

The coaches also impressed him and his family in a different way.

"We were kind of surprised that a big state school would have a strong spiritual component. That made us all feel like it was a special place because my wife and I sensed when they had prayer, it was genuine. It was not for show."

That put us both at ease," Fitzgerald said.

"Then Abule saw the facilities and the commitment to developing him and coach Stoops saying he wanted him as part of program. He took all that to heart and that's why he will be heading to Kentucky soon."

### 5th All-Time Scorer

Kentucky senior Makay-

la Epps is now in fifth place on the all-time UK scoring list with 1,620 points after her 23-point outing against Vanderbilt. That was her fourth straight game with 20 or more points and 10th of the season.

Epps certainly impressed Vanderbilt coach Stephanie White again.

"She's special. I think her ability to play at all three levels — shoot the 3, get to the paint and play in the mid-range — she's one of the great finishers with contact. She has great body control and she plays with emotion, and I love that! She's got an edge about her," White said. "She's got an edge that you need to be successful and I love that about her. She's special and she kicked our rear ends."

White says not to worry about Epps wearing down, either, despite the high number of minutes she has to play for UK and the different things she has to do on both ends of the court.

"I think her body type is built for it. I think a lot of times it's mental too and it's preparation. She's so much better now than when she was younger at taking care of her body and understanding what it takes to be able to sustain, not only in a game but the season," White said.

"She's strong as an ox and she doesn't put herself at risk for injury because she always has great body control. A lot of times you'll see people who set themselves up for injury because they're kind of all over the place and they don't have really good body control. She's always got control. I think she's going to make a great pro. She's got the skill set, the mentality. Now all she has to do is continue to focus on all the little things and I think she could have a long career."

### 3rd Super Bowl Is Less Stressful

Having her husband, Jacob Tamme, being a part of the Super Bowl for the third time in his career was a lot less stressful for Allison Tamme this year.

Jacob Tamme, a former Boyle County High School and University of Kentucky standout, had been to the Super Bowl with Indianapolis and Denver. This year he went with Atlanta even though he was on injured reserve after hurting his shoulder earlier in the season.

"It is not as stressful this time," Allison Tamme said while in Houston for the game.

She joked that for his first Super Bowl trip he bought a new suit. For this one, she pulled out the same suit to pack, saw a spot on it and used a Baby Wipe to get it off and sent him on his way.

Allison Tamme had a little fun on Twitter before the Falcons beat Green Bay in the NFC championship game to reach the Super Bowl.

"Dear Packers, You ended my husband's season on October 30th. Today, the Falcons will end yours. All my best, Allison," she posted on Twitter.

For those of us who know her, that jab was a little out of character.

"I was a little miffed because they had caused his season-ending injury," Allison Tamme said. "I knew we were going to win (the NFC title game). Both families (hers and Jacob's) were traveling to the game. My mom is so soft spoken and kind. She said, 'Allison you cannot do that.' I am not super outspoken usually even though contractors at our house do call me Miss Sassy. But I just felt like doing it and also having a little fun."

### 3 Best UK Players

Veteran Sporting News columnist Mike DeCourcy has covered college basketball for over 20 years and knew Kentucky coach John Calipari long before he got to Kentucky.

DeCourcy is one of the nation's most respected journalists — that's why he is in the United States Basketball Writers Hall of Fame.

During a recent conversation, I asked him who he thought were the three best UK players he has seen play. There were no restrictions. It could be four-year players or one-and-done guys or anything in between.

He said picking two of them — Jamal Mashburn and Anthony Davis — was easy.

"Jamal Mashburn is an easy choice. Despite that Christian Laettner moment (in the 1992 NCAA Tournament when Laettner's last-second shot beat UK in overtime), that was one of pivotal minutes in Kentucky history," DeCourcy said. "Kentucky went toe to toe and lost on miracle when nobody really thought they had the talent to stay with Duke."

"That is why they dominated the 90's. They were never that until that night and Kentucky basketball was reminded of what it could be and the next five or six years were great, and it began that night."

"Mashburn, I was there that night, he was phenomenal. I was there in New Orleans when UK made the Final Four with him (the next year). He is an easy choice in that trio of great Kentucky players."

"Without a doubt Anthony Davis is in there. It's kind of tricky because he only played one year. But Anthony Davis' one season was phenomenal. At mid-season that year we do an All-American team and Anthony was on the second or third team. But I remember writing he would be national player of the year, and he was. He was incredible all year and was in the tournament as well."

DeCourcy debated going with Tony Delk for the third spot. However, he opted for Karl-Anthony Towns.

"Karl was such a force at the heart of that undefeated team, and such a surprise to me in his one year," DeCourcy said. "I saw him going into his junior sea-



Former UK standout Jacob Tamme was part of his third Super Bowl team and his wife, Allison, couldn't resist a friendly Twitter jab before the NFC title game.

son of high school playing with John (Calipari) on the Dominican national team. I knew he had great ability, but all he did was play on the perimeter."

DeCourcy thought he might eventually be like NBA all-star Dirk Nowitzki of Dallas, a big guy with extraordinary perimeter skills.

"John convinced him that playing around the basket would make him special. He could do lots of things that nobody else could do. He has been all of that and more in the NBA, too," DeCourcy said. "At Kentucky he abandoned the perimeter game because that was not what the team needed. He added inside play and defense."

"He was a 100 percent different player after a year at Kentucky. He came there with a lot of talent, but left with even more."

### Making People Happy

Kentucky freshman offensive lineman Landon Young enjoys finding ways to make other people happy.

Kentucky football fans certainly were happy with

his play last season that helped UK reach the Tax-Slayer Bowl and get a regular-season win over Louisville.

Last week Young helped make a different set of folks happy when he stopped by Cambridge Place Rehab in Lexington for its Super Bowl party. He got to meet Lillie Atwater Owens, a resident at the facility. Her son, Dallas, was a football star at Lafayette — Young's high school — and then at Kentucky where he was the starting safety on the 1977 team that went 10-1.

Dallas Owens passed away in 2013 and his mother enjoyed having a chance to talk football with Young

### Quote of the Week

Quote of the week: Kentucky recruiting coordinator Vince Marrow on recruiting boost from beating Louisville — "I know when our coaches went out in December I had a lot of people telling me our coaches were walking in those schools with a swag. Everyone was talking about the Louisville game."



Abule Abadi-Fitzgerald came to the U.S. From Nigeria when he was 12 years old and was eventually adopted by Steve Fitzgerald and his wife. Now he's headed to UK to play football.



Kentucky freshman lineman Landon Young got to visit with Dallas Owens' mother, Lillie, during a visit to Cambridge Place Rehab for a Super Bowl party. (Larry Vaught Photo)