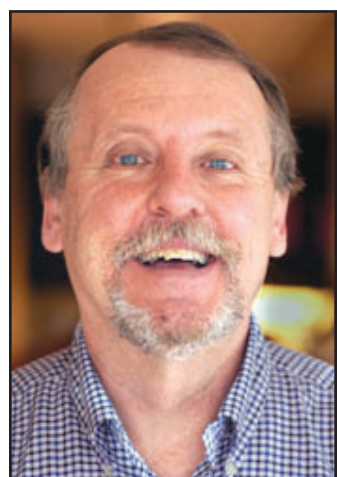


First season at UK was "like a roller-coaster!"



by Larry Vaught

His first season at Kentucky was even more of a learning experience than linebacker Kash Daniel anticipated.

"It was like a roller-coaster," said Daniel. "This was my first year to really learn about playing football. Pulling guards, check calls, all that stuff. Back in high school you would just see the ball and tackle the guy. Now you can't do it.

"In high school you were trying to do everybody's job. Now you do your job and once you secure your job then you can help somebody else. But if you don't do your job first, you screw the whole play up."

Daniel is now in his second spring practice getting set for his sophomore season where he figures to get a lot more playing time at middle linebacker.

"I have had a fun experience with these guys and that is what I like the most about football. I love the game itself, but just the friendships and bond you build with the guys is just something amazing," the Paintsville product said. "I spend 12 hours a day with these dudes and clowns. You think I go home mad? Absolutely not.

"I have had a great time learning from the coaches and everybody around me. Courtney Love, Jordan Jones. Being on special teams and making plays for myself, my school. I just love it and all that goes with it."

Daniel was an in-state star and one of the gems in Kentucky's 2016 recruiting class. He set high expectations for himself. He wanted to start on the punt, kickoff and kickoff return teams. He wanted to be a playmaker when he did get in games. He also wanted to be a "great" teammate no matter what his role turned out to be.

"I keep it real. I knew coming in I would not be a starter. Courtney (Love) had a lot of experience ahead of me. It has been really great to learn from him and see what he does," Daniel said.

"He is a technician and really a sound, fundamental linebacker. He doesn't miss his gap, miss his keys. To sit back and take a mental rep and watch him has been great."

Daniel could be Love's primary backup this year as part of a linebacking group that has a lot more experience — and much higher expectations from the UK coaching staff.

"What makes it so great is that nothing is ever given to you and you have to work your butt off to get time on the field," Daniel said. "That is what makes football such a great sport. In sports and life in general, there is always somebody that is out there just as good if not better than you.

"When they come in, it is your job to say, 'OK you are just getting here, so let's have a competition. If you win, you win and I will support you. But if I win, I am going out there to make plays.'"

Daniel learned there are no plays off, even in practice, or it shows.

"When your number is called and you get out there, you damn well better be prepared because if you are not, things go downhill. You will have your coach coming to jump on you and you will get frustrated. I have had to have Courtney to come over and calm me down and that's not that much fun," Daniel said.

Junior linebacker Josh Allen says Daniel can "get in that moment" in a hurry.

"When he is in that moment, I say, 'Kash, calm down.' He just has to get his head right. He is thinking too much out there. We just have to help him get his focus down and settle him down because he can get a little emotional," Allen said.

Daniel said he knows others make mistakes, but he has high standards for himself.

"I have always been really hard on myself. Even if it is something small, I think it is something huge. I think that is a good thing about me because I don't like to mess up but I am not afraid. If I mess up, I am going 100 miles per hour. It's not a mistake where I am lackadaisical or not paying attention. I am going full speed even when I am wrong," he said. "That's just me."

Derek Willis

After Kentucky survived against Wichita State Sunday, a lot of attention was given to the way De'Aaron Fox, Malik Monk and Bam Adebayo played, especially

late in the game. However, not nearly enough attention was given to Derek Willis.

Remember he's the senior who has been blasted by coach John Calipari for three years and often criticized both by fans and the media for his lack of defense. However, he's a big reason UK not only won Sunday, but also has won 13 straight games.

Willis hit two second-half 3-pointers against Wichita State. He had nine points, eight rebounds, three steals and one blocked shot. It's the kind of numbers he's been putting up a lot recently and his rebounding has helped make UK a much better team. Same with his shot blocking ability (he has 17 blocked shots in the last seven games).

For Kentucky to make the Final Four, Kentucky will need more of that from Willis. But not only is he playing his best, Calipari also has the most confidence in Willis right now that he's had in his four years at UK.

Makayla Epps

It was no surprise that when Makayla Epps left the Memorial Coliseum court for the final time that she cried. I can't remember any player — male or female — who has loved playing basketball at Kentucky as much as the former Marion County standout.

Kentucky's loss to Ohio State in the NCAA Tournament second round ended UK's season and Epps' remarkable collegiate career. She had 21 points in her final game — her 33rd game with 20 or more points — and played all 40 minutes. She finished her career with 1,790 points, fifth best in school history, and 408 assists, seventh on the all-time lists.

"We made Memorial Coliseum rock today and I will never forget the players in the locker room," Epps said after her final game. "Maci (Morris) came up to me a minute ago and hugged me telling me that I'm the best teammate she ever had and one of the best people she's ever been around. It really means a lot to me.

"It's a lot more than just basketball for me, basketball isn't forever for me but just to know that I have made a huge impact on so many people's lives during my four years here means the world to me."

Which UK Freshman?

Which Kentucky freshman might have the biggest upside in the NBA?

That's a question I posed to Blue Ribbon College Basketball Yearbook editor Chris Dortch, who also writes for nba.com, during the Southeastern Conference Tournament after he watched the Cats win three games.

"I think if Malik Monk can add bulk and strength, he's got the ability to score at a high rate at the next level. So he might have the best chance to be a No. 1 option scoring option for his team," Dortch said.

"Having said that, good point guards are always a rare commodity, so De'Aaron Fox is unique in that respect. And after researching a story for Bam Adebayo during the NCAA tournament, a lot of people in the program think he's barely scratched the surface of what he's capable of doing."

Bottom line? Dortch thinks all three are going to be really good at the next level.

New MSU Coach

Alabama senior Corban Collins spent three years at

Morehead before transferring to Alabama for his final season. During his last two seasons, Preston Spradlin was an assistant on coach Sean Woods' staff.

When Woods lost his job early last season, Spradlin was named interim coach. He did a superb job and last week finally was named the new head coach.

"Coach Spradlin, we bonded and he was a guy who always worked me out. We still talk as well. We have a really nice bond and friendship. I look up to him as a big brother and mentor as well. I had a great relationship with him," Collins said.

"It was no surprise what he did. I had confidence in him and I know how passionate he is about basketball. He was with a great basketball mind under coach Cal (John Calipari). He was able to soak up all that knowledge. Sometimes all a man needs is a chance. His chance came in an unfortunate situation but he made the most of it."

He did and former teammates told Collins that Spradlin was their choice to be the new coach.

"I talked to guys after the OVC Tournament and they all wanted him as head coach. Everybody in the community is behind him and trying to fight for him to get that job. I hope he gets it," Collins said a week before Spradlin finally got the job.

Spradlin was on Calipari's staff five years — two as a graduate assistant and three as the assistant director of operations — before coming to Morehead. The Pikeville native was in charge of film breakdown, creating playbooks and assisting with scouting at Kentucky.

Talking Back

Have you ever noticed the way that players sometimes talk back to John Calipari during games? It has happened during his entire time at Kentucky, and likely will continue.

"Many times I'm getting on a kid because I don't think he's shown enough emotion or energy, like you've got more than this. I've got -- okay, now play that way. Just trying to get them to show they're alive. Are you alive? Like you look like you're going -- so many times, I'm doing that," Calipari said.

"If there's a time that I don't need it to come back, I'll say stop and they'll stop. Short of that, I'm Italian. I'm emotional. And I expect



Derek Willis' rebounding and shot blocking has been a big factor in UK's 13-game win streak. (Jeff Houchin Photo)

them not to be and they're in this game flying up and down and I'm sweating and losing my mind and I get on a kid, but you can't say anything? Don't you say one -- what?

"I've had guys come back at me. I can remember back in the UMass days, we could be more physical then. You can't be physical now. Back then, I was stronger and more agile than I am right now."

Quotes of the Week

Quote of the Week:

"It's a remarkable group, and it's an absolute zero-drama group. It's an unselfish group. They don't care about anything other than

winning for each other and Kentucky coming out on top. That's been a lot of fun," Kentucky women's coach Matthew Mitchell on this year's team.

Quote of the Week 2:

"Will I do it again next year? I don't know. I'm hoping 20 other coaches do them so I can stop doing it. Then I don't have to do it," Kentucky coach John Calipari on the podcast he started this year.

Quote of the Week 3:

"He still brings clothes over to wash to his mom. I know he does that. It's probably against the NCAA rules, but he does it," John Calipari on having his son, Brad, on the team this year.



Makayla Epps will remember the impact she made on people's lives during her UK career. (Vicky Graff Photo)



Kash Daniel (right) sets high standards for himself and has had to learn to control his emotions when he makes a mistake. (Vicky Graff Photo)