

Bryce Hopkins not the kind of player that backs down from any challenge



by Larry Vaught

The first time coach Staunton Peck met Bryce Hopkins was the fall of his eighth-grade year when he went to watch his middle school team play. He met Hopkins and his family and they even came to some of Peck's game at Fenton (Ill.) High School that season.

"I knew in eighth grade he could be special. He was probably 6-2 and had guard skills. His ball handling for a guy that size was really impressive. I was pretty positive he would be a Division I player," Peck said.

The coach was right but admitted he did not quite envision the 6-7, 215-pound Hopkins committing to Kentucky like he recently did when he picked the Cats over Illinois, Providence, Indiana and Michigan. He originally committed to Louisville before changing his mind in August.

"He has got so much better. I would not have bet a ton of money on him being a high major player as an eighth-grader but the more I got to know him and saw how hard he worked along with the support system he had at home, I knew he could be really good and he just keeps getting better," Peck said.

"I am not surprised by how good he is now. He made some really big strides and his body really matured before his sophomore and junior seasons. He never relaxes in terms of working out. He doesn't take many days off even in the offseason."

Hopkins is a four-star wing and top 30 player in the 2021 recruiting class. Peck says Hopkins deserves that ranking but expects him to be an even better player in a couple more years.

"When things get hard or somebody challenges Bryce, he is not the kind of kid to give up," Peck said. "He gets in there and works on his game. A lot of that comes from the message his parents give him. Sometimes if things go wrong, parents com-

plain or blame someone else. That limits how good a player can become. Not his parents. They are always saying what can you do better. He hears that constantly."

Peck says he has huge hands and is a physical, strong player who does not bounce off players when he gets to the rim.

"They bounce off him. But he's also creative. He spins off guys. He can dunk but he can also finish with finesse around the hoop and do more than just power through opponents," Peck said.

The coach believes Hopkins could play anywhere from point guard to power forward in college. He can finish with either hand — "he finishes dunks more with his right hand" — and dribbles equally well with both hands.

"He changes speeds well. In transition he could lead the break and pass the ball easily," Peck said. "In terms of vertical, he's not a freak athlete but he will finish. Don't doubt that."

"His shot continues to get better, too. He's always had a good looking shot but it will keep getting better because he works on it so much."

Peck says practice is scheduled to start Nov. 16 and his team's first game is now scheduled for Dec. 4.

"The good thing is I know Bryce never stops working so no matter how little practice time we have, he'll be ready," Peck said.

Vanderbilt Next

Redshirt sophomore running back Chris Rodriguez wouldn't say he needed the bye week UK got but admits he was "thankful" for it going into Saturday's game against Vanderbilt.

Kentucky is only 2-4 and has struggled offensively but Rodriguez has been one consistent positive for the offense. He has rushed for 413 yards and four scores this year — and had two 100-yard games — to push his career totals to 989 yards and 10 touchdowns. He's had 148 career carries and is averaging about 6.5 yards per attempt.

"I think I have played well but there are some areas I need to work on. Better (pass) protection, better catching out of the backfield. Basically things like that," he said.

Kentucky fans love Rodriguez because he often refuses to be tackled. He has a propensity for drag-

ging would-be tacklers with him and he won't change that style no matter what physical toll it takes on him.

"The way I play is the way I have always played my whole life. That will not change," he said "If I am not in the league (NFL) as long as I want (because his body wears out), that's God telling me (to quit)."

He insists he's not trying to make a statement to fans, teammates or opponents when he refuses to be tackled.

"But if they cannot get me down, why go down," Rodriguez said.

The sophomore from Georgia said he felt like there were a "few changes" the UK offense could make to find its best style.

"We have always been doing other stuff. It's just a matter of perfecting it," Rodriguez said. "All the teams try to stack the box. If they ain't stopping it (UK's running game), that's on them. We are just going to keep doing what we are doing and then perfect everything else."

Treasure Hunt

Treasure Hunt is 6-1 versatile guard who can score in multiple ways and could give Kentucky a needed consistent second scorer to go with Rhyme Howard this season.

She was a top 10 player in the 2020 recruiting class after scoring over 2,000 points at Hamilton Heights Christian Academy in Chattanooga and helping her team win over 100 games in her career. She averaged 24.7 points, 5.3 rebounds, 2.3 assists, 1.6 steals and 1.2 blocks per game as a senior. The five-star guard picked UK over Baylor, South Carolina, Mississippi State and Auburn in part because she was a former AAU teammate of Howard, an all-American at UK last year.

Kentucky coach Matthew Mitchell preaches patience with freshmen and not to expect too much. So I asked him recently if it was okay to be optimistic and expect a big season from Hunt this and is averaging about 6.5 yards per attempt.

"It is alright to be optimistic, Larry, because she is a talented player. She is just working — all the freshmen are ... it just never fails it seems like to have to make an adjustment to the pace with how we practice and how important each play is in practice and the detail you have to pay attention to," Mitchell said.

"She is tremendously talented and so gifted. Another physical presence and upgrade for us at the wing position. She has great length, great size and is very strong as a freshman. All of that will just continue to improve. She is a tremendous shooter and very poised ballhandler."

No surprise Mitchell said she is working to improve her defense but says her talent is allowing her to make daily progress.

"I will just tell you that we have to do a great job coaching her and paying attention to the details and make sure we are doing the right things on the

basketball court on how to be a Kentucky Wildcat. She has just shown tremendous improvement and potentially could be a big weapon for us," Mitchell said.

Men's Basketball

New Kentucky basketball assistant coach Jai Lucas said he couldn't do anything but shake his head and laugh when UK was paired against Texas in the Big 12/SEC Challenge.

Lucas was an assistant coach at Texas before joining John Calipari's staff recently.

"I'll be excited to see everybody down there. I still keep in contact with a lot of the players and the staff and stuff like that," Lucas said. "I was telling some of the people here, they have a really good team. They have a Final Four team as well. I think we do have a good team here too, so I think it will be a really good game."

Texas is known nationally as a football school but like Kentucky is known as a basketball school.

"Nothing against Texas, but football is king down there in every aspect. Just being up here in Kentucky and interacting with people you understand how big basketball is. Not just the University of Kentucky, but even high school basketball. How they talk about it and know all the players and stuff like that," Lucas said.

"So it's very refreshing when you're a basketball person to be at a basketball place."

Ky. Volleyball

Madison Lilley admits her first year at Kentucky she really didn't know what All-American players were and just kind of thinking it was "pretty cool" when coach Craig Skinner called after her freshman season to let her know she was a second-team All-American.

Now the senior setter is "pumped" to earn a first-team honor after being second team the last three seasons.

"That's something I do want and I am chasing that," Lilley said. "But I also want to keep being a really good teammate off the court. I pride myself in my play on the court but in college it's also about creating relationships that will last a lifetime and that's something I never thought of until I got here."

"That thought plays a huge role in everything I do now. I reach out to teammates more on and off the court. My mindset has really grown in three years in that aspect. Mentally and physically I have grown into being a great person, student and leader thanks to Craig."

No matter what kind of statistics Lilley has during a match — and they are usually very good — it seems that Skinner is always wanting more. The coach normally will spend more time telling you what she could have done better than bragging on what she did.

However, that suits Lilley because she wants Skinner to push her. She knows Skinner knows better than anyone else what she needs to fine



Freshman Treasure Hunt (right) has the talent to be a huge help for All-American Rhyme Howard this season. (Twitter Photo)

tune in her game to make her a better player and Kentucky a better team.

"We have setter training and Craig is pretty hands on. He more than anyone sees what I can fine tune and do better. I never want Craig to think something I did was just unbelievable. You want positive feedback but I want him to push me about small things I can work on," the UK senior said. "Craig loves fundamentals and after being exposed to Craig and all that knowledge I am so much more than just a setter now."

BJ Boston

If you are wondering which Kentucky player might give out the most memorable quotes this season, let me predict it will be freshman BJ Boston.

He might also be the best player on the team — something most recruiting analysts would also predict.

But when it comes to quotes, he's good. I mean, really good.

What does he think about the UK schedule that finally got released Friday?

"I'm excited. I feel like a dog in a cage. I'm just ready to get out and go to war with my guys," Boston said.

Dog in a cage? Tough to top that quote on scheduling.

I asked Boston what might be fair expectations for him this season.

"I really wouldn't put expectations on me. I would just tell them to come and watch the game; I'll put on a show every game," Boston said.

See. Confident and quotable.

Why did he decide to wear No. 3 at Kentucky rather than his regular number?

"Growing up it was 11, but I felt like (No.) 3, I had to switch it up. It's just a new beginning, so it's my new number. I really only play for the last name on the back of my jersey," Boston said.

Quotes

Quote of the Week: "The same message it's always been is block out the outside noise. Just make sure we stay together as one team, and make sure we pick up from here. That's all there is to do. Just prepare," UK linebacker Jamin Davis on how to avoid being distracted by the negativity about UK's 2-4 start.

Quote of the Week 2: "Honestly, you can see glimpses in practice of offense and defense, but the big thing is going to be our defense. Our defense is really, really, really good. That's not even taking away from our offense, but our defense is just there," sophomore Dontae Allen on what he likes best about John Calipari's team.

Quote of the Week 3: "You've just got to be mentally prepared every day. There's no days off here. You are working here every day to be a professional basketball player, so Coach Cal is not going to let you take days off, take plays off or whatever the case may be. You have to work every single day," Terrence Clarke on what he would tell UK recruits about playing for the Cats.

Sunday, December 8th

Scooter Operator Is Arrested for Trafficking

A scooter operator was arrested early Sunday by Irvine Officer Stewart Morris on drug trafficking charges.

Morris said that Mikal Lee Adams, 21, of N. Plum Street was operating a scooter on S. Plum Street and was weaving and almost losing control.

The citation stated that Adams took off running and would not stop when verbally commanded to do so.

Deputy Sheriff Josh King caught up with Adams on North Plum Street, Officer Morris stated that in Adams' front hoodie was a plas-

tic case. When he opened it, it had \$113 in cash, a plastic bag with a crystal like substance greater than two ounces, a plastic bag with a green leafy substance, and a piece of cigarette foil with a green leafy substance.

Adams was charged with trafficking in a controlled substance, first degree, second offense or greater and greater than two grams (methamphetamine), possession of marijuana, second degree fleeing or evading police (on foot), and resisting arrest.

Adams was incarcerated at Three Forks Regional Jail.



Sophomore Chris Rodriguez (#24) needs only nine yards against Vanderbilt Saturday to reach 1,000 in his career and is on pace to become just the 10th UK player ever to reach 2,000 yards. (SEC Photo)