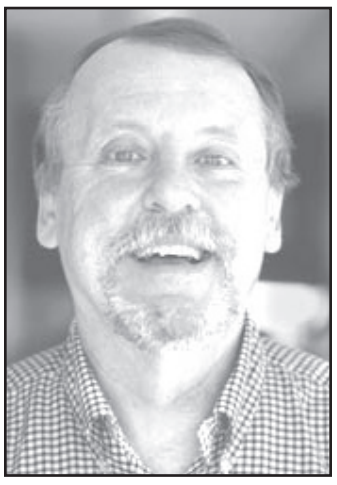


Kentucky wants to keep signing in-state difference makers



by Larry Vaught

Kentucky coach Mark Stoops let everyone know what the biggest storyline should be from national signing day — Kentucky signing seven in-state players.

“Kentucky high school football is really getting good,” said Kentucky recruiting coordinator Vince Marrow.

He didn’t mean Kentucky high school football had not been good before but that it was getting good at a new level

“It’s getting good to where we can recruit our own kids here and sign about seven or eight kids from the state. I think the athletes are better,” Marrow said. “A lot of Power Five schools really wanted those guys (Kentucky signed).”

Stoops said Kentucky high school coaches were doing an “exceptional job” and it’s easy to see that paying off on the field.

“It’s so much better from top to bottom than it was early on and I think that’s the big storyline with this class,” Stoops said. “The past three years we have signed difference makers in this

state and want to continue that.

Mercer County coach David Buchanan did not have a Kentucky signee but he is president of the Kentucky Football Coaches Association. He appreciated Stoops praising the work high school coaches do, especially during this stressful COVID-19 2020 season.

“Kentucky high school coaches do work hard and we appreciate coach Stoops saying that,” Buchanan said. “It means a lot for him to say that. I think the athletic training and individual training for players is better than it has ever been and that is part of coaching. The numbers (running, jumping, etc.) are better and that’s because people spend more time on training. People are better at teaching speed and explosiveness than ever before.”

Kentucky signed four-star offensive lineman Jager Burton and four-star receiver Dekel Crowdus, both of Frederick Douglass, along with three-star players Jordan Dingle (tight end) of Bowling Green, La’Vell Wright (running back) and Jordan Lovett (safety) of North Hardin, and Kaiya Sheron (quarterback) of Somerset. The other addition was Georgia Tech transfer Justice Dingle (linebacker) of Bowling Green.

“It has been a priority to concentrate on this state. Hopefully some of the work we have done at the college level is carrying down and inspiring some of the youngsters at

middle school and grade school and helping in some small way,” Stoops said. “We are always open to the high school coaches, always invite them here and have a great relationship with them.”

Many of the state’s high school coaches were at Kroger Field last weekend for the six state championship games.

“We work extremely hard to keep the best talent at home and we want them here, and I think that’s evident by the way we’ve been working it the past couple of years,” Stoops said.

Marrow said he was excited early in the season when North Hardin played at Douglass. The game not only had four UK commits but another five players with Kentucky offers.

“You see that in Ohio. You see that in Georgia. You see it in Texas with multiple committed guys playing against each other,” Marrow said. “I know when I first got here, you might see one (committed) guy (in a game). So that was a game that was very important for the state of Kentucky and Kentucky high school football.”

“There’s a lot of young talent here. I can’t say names but you guys (in the media) know even at the (20)22 class who the main guys are. I’ll just take my hat off to these coaches because the product and how they are being developed and coached is really the reason why we are recruiting them now. So I love this state. The football is great.”



Frederick Douglass teammates Dekel Crowdus, right, and Jager Burton, both four-star prospects, were two of the seven in-state players to sign with UK last week. (Teresa Burton Photo)

Did time in NFL make Wolford a better coach?

Eric Wolford is a former head coach at Youngstown State and most recently has been offensive line coach at South Carolina. He has a wealth of collegiate coaching experience but also spent two seasons (2015-16) in the NFL as an assistant line coach with the San Francisco 49ers.

That made me wonder how he thought his time in the NFL made him a better college coach, or if it did. That’s the question I asked him during his first UK press conference after his hire last week by coach Mark Stoops.



New UK offensive line coach Eric Wolford learned several things in the NFL that have made him a better college coach. (South Carolina Athletics Photo)

Wolford had a two-part answer. “One, when I was the head coach at Youngstown State I was there five years, you learn to appreciate assistants who handle their business,” Wolford said. “Meaning, they take care of their recruiting, their position players, handle their grades, not in trouble off the field and developing them as young men.”

Then he got to the part about what he learned in the NFL, and his answer might surprise you.

“When I had the opportunity to go to the NFL and sitting through two drafts I found out real quick that there are a lot of things college guys don’t know that NFL guys are looking at. Can they play multiple positions?” he said.

“First night of my career, I’m all excited and we’re playing the Minnesota Vikings. How many offensive linemen were suited up to play? Seven, and five were starters. You have to train guys to play multiple positions. You can’t just be a center. I learned that in the NFL.”

He learned other things, too. “I also learned about taking care of your body, finding the right kind of guys. These NFL teams follow these players (on social media) when they’re a sophomore. You think it’s a beautiful blonde girl but guess what, it’s not,” the new UK assistant coach said.

“It’s somebody working in the 49ers office seeing if you want to get together and party this weekend. They know everything about you. You’ve got to let your players know that.”

Cousins and Wall back together

It’s nice to see former Kentucky star DeMarcus Cousins not only back playing with former UK teammate John Wall in Houston but also to see him apparently healthy after suffering a ruptured Achilles tendon and torn ACL the last two seasons.

“I feel incredible. Being away from the game as long as I have been obviously was a tough task but at the same time I was able to rest my body and get some much needed rest,” Cousins said. “My body is in great place, mind is in a great place. Just ready to play the game that I love.”

Cousins did say he felt he had been to “h__ and back” with his injuries and rehab during sprints with the Warriors and Lakers.

“I would be lying if I was telling you the task was not tough,” Cousins said. “I willed my way through it and learned a lot about myself and life in general. I think I have grown in a lot of different ways.”

“I learned a lot about myself. I went through situations that would make a lot of people give up or quit. I just took it as my life lesson. I am not the only person going through hard times. When those times come just fight through and roll with the punches.”

Cousins said Wall and him had planned for a long time to play together and were excited it was finally happening.

“Obviously there is a chemistry between us from our college days,” Cousins

said. “We have known each other since we were 14. I consider him one of my better friends.”



DeMarcus Cousins says missing time with injuries the last two seasons gave his body some much needed rest.

Kentucky recruit Lewis is said to be the “most underrated signee in the state of Alabama

Alabama receiver Christian Lewis is a four-star recruit by 247Sports who had 70 catches for 1,235 yards and 18 touchdowns as a senior for Pleasant Grove High School. He got his team into back-to-back state title games in 2019 and 2020 and had six catches for 111 yards and two scores in the state championship game this year. He also had four catches for 57 yards in the Mississippi-Alabama All-Star Classic this year.

The 6-4, 190-pound Lewis had 75 catches for 1,398 yards and 20 touchdowns as a junior.

Al.com writer Randy Ken-

nedly called Lewis the “most underrated” signee in the state of Alabama. Here’s what he wrote in his national signing day story:

“Pleasant Grove wide receiver Christian Lewis chose Kentucky over pretty much nobody. Four years from now, after he’s played in the 2025 Senior Bowl and his name is called in the NFL Draft, a lot of people in Alabama are going to be wondering why we never heard his name associated with the (Alabama) Crimson Tide or (Auburn) Tigers.”

Lewis is a three-sport athlete — he was Class 5A all-state second team in

basketball as a junior and also runs track. Lewis was named Class 5A first-team offense by the Alabama Sports Writers Association and MaxPreps in 2020.

Stoops said Lewis was one of the “difference makers” in UK’s signing class and even without offers from Alabama or Auburn, he did still have close to 50 scholarship offers.

Lewis said on signing day that the addition of Los Angeles Rams assistant coach Liam Coen as offensive coordinator impressed him and he thinks “UK will open up the passing game more and the ball to playmakers.”

Poor shooting sparks a lot of conversation

Kentucky’s disappointing 3-point shooting this year has sparked a lot of conversation about how 3-point shooters Johnny Juzang, Jamarl Baker and Michael Mulder never were significant contributors at UK. Baker transferred to Arizona and Juzang to UCLA. Mulder stayed at UK after transferring in from a junior college and is now with the Golden State Warriors.

“The guys they were playing behind, it’s like I could have said, ‘They’re going to take 20 of your minutes. How would you feel about that?’ That’s the hard thing about this,” Kentucky coach John Calipari said.

“I wish Johnny well. We did everything we could to help him play right away, knowing that we were going to play him. I still hope he does well.”

Same for Mulder.

“Happy for Mychal Mul-

der. It’s a great story. The hardest thing in college basketball is being a junior college player and then going to a high major, major school. Because normally it takes you time to get adjustments,” Calipari said.

“Mychal Mulder, toughed it out, fought like heck. Wish he would have done more. I wanted him to do more. He wanted (to do more here). But he had a good career here. And now sticking it out, fighting it, he’s on a (NBA) roster. I couldn’t be more happy for him.”

This season former Kentucky Mr. Basketball Dontaie Allen, a prolific scorer in high school, has played just 19 minutes in four games. He did not play in last week’s loss to North Carolina.

“I could have done it today,” Calipari said after the North Carolina loss.

He didn’t because he was “giving guys in front of him

the room they need to miss shots” and see if they could start making shots.

“I go in practice and they (UK players) make shots,” Calipari said. “Not coming out every time I miss a shot. That’s not how I coach. I am trying to give them room and encourage them to shoot. We have some guys in huddles I tell if they do not shoot they are coming out. Dontaie just has to stay ready so when the opportunity comes, he is ready,” Calipari said.

Keaton Belcher, Allen’s coach at Pendleton County, went on social media after the game in response to so many questions from UK fans and speculation Allen might transfer over his lack of playing time.

“I just keep telling DA (DontaieAllen) to work harder. He will get his shot eventually,” Belcher said. “He’s not going anywhere. Whole state is rooting for him.”

Quotes of the Week

Quote of the Week: “I don’t really pay attention to that other school. I’m here now. I’m at Kentucky,” Devin Askew on whether playing Louisville, a school on his final list, makes Saturday’s game any more important to him.

Quote of the Week 2: “He’s a guy that plays with a lot of

confidence. He just looks very calm and collected,” former UK quarterback Dusty Bonner on UK quarterback signee Kaiya Sheron of Somerset.

Quote of the Week 3: “I’ve been a point guard all my life. I feel I’m versatile playing off the ball, on the ball. I was trying to tell all the NBA teams that I’m

somebody who just happened to play off the ball at Kentucky that one year, my sophomore year. I can really do both. And I’m glad the Knicks picked me. I’m glad to be here. The fans are great,” New York Knicks rookie Immanuel Quickley on his ability to play point guard in the NBA.