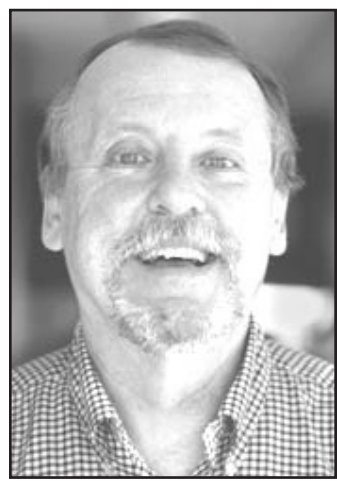


Tai Wynyard



Larry Vaught

Now that he has signed his letter-of-intent and will soon be joining the University of Kentucky basketball program, Tai Wynyard of Auckland, New Zealand, says he can't wait to get to Lexington.

"I'm really excited to get into the system and just start balling and learning everything I can," said he 6-9, 230-pound forward who was part of the World Select Team that beat Team USA at the 2015 Nike Hoop Summit.

His parents, Jason and Karmyn Wynyard, say they are excited and also grateful to coach John Calipari for giving him this opportunity.

"We believe Tai is ready to pour his heart and soul into this and to take his game to another level," Jason Wynyard said.

Calipari says Wynyard is a totally different player from others in his signing class or on the current team.

"With Tai, you're talking about a 6-9 physical athlete who is not afraid to get physical," Calipari said. "He has good skills. The most exciting part is what he's done with his country's national team. Everybody that's watched him recently has said, 'Man has he gotten better. He's competing at a high level.' They've never seen him as physically fit."

He committed to Kentucky almost a year ago and has been doing his best to stay in basketball shape while finishing academic requirements so he could enroll at the semester break at Kentucky. He recently spent time playing in Hungary.

"I've been playing a lot with the Breakers (his local team) and various other teams, so I've been pretty busy. The event in Hungary was a cool experience and I loved being apart of a world champion team. I've just been focussing on rebounding the ball and putting it in the hoop," Tai Wynyard said.

He knows going against Skal Labissiere, Marcus Lee and Isaac Humphries daily in practice will make him improve. Calipari says going against NBA talent like that daily helps players far more than facing future NBA talent in eight to 10 games per year.

"I think it's going to be a real test of my capabilities (going against them), especially me not getting the training that they have been getting," Tai Wynyard said. "I will be slightly behind, but I will work hard and use my strength to make up for it."

Calipari has not told Wynyard whether he will play the second semester or redshirt to save a year of eligibility and just practice with the team. He says either decision is fine with him.

"It really won't make a difference," he said. "I'm still going to push myself until I get there and then work is going to get a lot harder."

His parents sending their oldest son to Kentucky to play basketball will be hard in some ways.

"As parents we are not looking forward to seeing him go. However, we are confident that he is going to be in a nurturing environment where he can learn, grow and be the best he can be," Jason Wynyard said.

They describe him as a fun-loving kid that gets along with everyone.

"If Kentucky fans don't already love him, they will once they get to know him," said Karmyn Wynyard. "Tai is a good role model and caring big brother to his brother and sister. This makes us proud."

The player and his parents have seen little of UK basketball this season since games are not on TV in New Zealand.

"That's life here in little old NZ (New Zealand)," Tai Wynyard said.

"Hopefully we can travel as a family to see Tai this season, but for now we are hopeful some games will be aired on TV here in New Zealand," his mother said.

Wynyard's parents have been told Kentucky is "basketball crazy." They don't think that will bother their son.

"Tai is a very grounded young man, and we are sure he will take it all in his stride," Jason Wynyard said. "As parents, it's fantastic to know there is so much support for Kentucky basketball. And now we are fans, too."

Of course, Tai Wynyard will have to adjust to certain things in Lexington like no surfing or wood chopping like there is in New Zealand. But he also enjoys fishing and swimming when not playing basketball.

"Probably just missing my family and being able to go to the beach will be what I miss most," Tai Wynyard said. "Being close to the sea is a lot of fun because you can do so much, but I'm sure Kentucky will be amazing, too."

One distinction that Kentucky freshman guard Isaiah Briscoe will always have is that he was the first high school athlete to write for The Players' Tribune, a website founded by former New York Yankees great Derek Jeter.

The website provides direct first-person stories from athletes and Briscoe wrote about social media.

"I was just showing people how today's world works with social media and everything is captured on either Instagram or Twitter. I just wanted to have my input out there and tell people growing up that this is what you should be looking out for as you get older," said Briscoe.

He said he was willing to write and share his feelings because of the format The Players Tribune uses.

"You can actually write your paper instead of people asking you questions. I think that was just a great opportunity for me to vent to youth and help them out and let them know what is up and coming," Briscoe said. "I could see myself writing more blogs for The Players Tribune. I had a blast doing it and just want to thank them for giving me the opportunity."

"I got a lot of feedback. A lot of people saw it and said it was great. That is the kind of rep I want and I want to continue to write for them and become a bigger brother to youth and those growing up."

Briscoe shared how important social media is and why. Since he got to UK, he says his social media presence has grown.

"Even when they were recruiting me, it grew. I heard Kentucky fans are

outstanding. It has lived up to the hype so far," Briscoe said.

Will the fan noise have an impact on Kentucky football recruiting? Could it cause players to de-commit or make players understand the passion UK football fans have and show them the opportunity to play early at Kentucky?

That's the questions I posed to Kentucky coach Mark Stoops last week.

"Well, I think it can affect somebody in different ways. You're not sure. We continue to build our relationships and recruit players. Sure, players that are close, they hear the noise and all that. It could affect them either way, I'm sure," Stoops said.

The coach admitted there was always reason to worry about de-commitments at any programs.

"Certainly when you lose some games it doesn't help you in that front. But no, I feel very good about it. I feel very good about the nucleus of this group. Very good. I think if you look across college football, there's going to be some (de-commits). And when some happens, let's not panic. We'll be OK. We are recruiting quite a few players right now. So I feel very good about the nucleus of what we have recruited," Stoops said.

Woodford County offensive lineman Drake Jackson, an Army All-American, feels the same way. He's a key to Stoops' 2016 recruiting class along with linebacker Kash Daniel of Paintsville and offensive lineman Landon Young of Lafayette. They are also both Army All-American

honorees.

"Our whole (recruiting) class is ver close. We have become like best friends," Jackson said. "I don't think any of us would want to let the others down by de-committing. We believe we can win. We don't want to feel like we can win. We want to feel like we can't lose."

Jackson said at least four other players — Daniel, Ohio quarterback Gunnar Hoak, Georgia defensive lineman Kobe Smith and Ohio receiver Dakota Holtzclaw — also plan to enroll for the start of the second semester.

"I have heard there is a chance there could be more, but right now there are four of us," Jackson said.

Former Kentucky All-American Mike Pratt, now a analyst on the UK Radio Basketball Network, knows many fans would still like to see UK play a regular-season game in Louisville like the Cats did for years to give more fans an option to get tickets. He also knows it likely will never happen again.

"I think if all the neutral site games continue — and I am not sure they wil — it won't happen in Louisville. The single hardest thing for a school like Kentucky or Louisville is scheduling. Kentucky would play Duke home and home. Duke does not want to play," Pratt said.

"North Carolina is not sure it wants to continue a home and home series. Kentucky does. Kentucky had a deal on the table for four games with Indiana. The first two would be in Indianapolis and then in Lexington and then Bloom-



Tai Wynyard, right, isn't worried about whether he redshirts or plays this season. The 6-9 forward from New Zealand is excited just to be joining Kentucky for the second semester.

(New Zealand Breakers Photo)

ington. (Indiana coach Tom Crean turned it down. I saw the contract, so I know that is true. All they wanted was home and home. But you can make more money in Indianapolis than from a home game. It would have been a financial bonanza for both teams. But it won't happen.

"Same with regular-sea-

son games in Louisville. While they were nice, I just don't see it happening again."

If you have a comment, suggestion or criticism, let me know at larryvau@gmail.com or on Twitter at [@vaughtsviews](https://twitter.com/@vaughtsviews). I've enjoyed hearing from a lot of you the last few weeks.

Bob Watkins' Sports In Kentucky

Sweet potato pie to birthday No. 96, Thanksgiving is about gratitude



Bob Watkins

"Think I'll cut back on some of the Thanksgiving dinner things," I said to the wife.

"OK," she replied, "Which ones do you want to leave out: Cranberry salad? Mashed potatoes? Dressing? Sweet potato pie? Rolls? Pumpkin pie?" Never mind, I said.

To readers of this newspaper, in particular you who spare a few of 10,080 minutes a week to agree-and-not with one old guy's opinions before tossing it into the trash, thank you. Your time is precious and e-mails afterward are too. Even those with suggestions of where I can stick my points-of-view which often are physically impossible.

This week, in the spirit of good intentions, a few ideas with Mark Twain in mind. "The human race," he wrote, "has one really effective weapon, laughter."

1. Thanksgiving nuggets to express holiday gratitude include ...

- "Never correct a fool for he will hate you for it. Correct a wise man and he will appreciate you."
- "I know what I have given you. I do not know what you have received."

2. Good advice Dept. "Trust your hunches. They're usually based on

facts filed away just below the conscious level." — Dr. Joyce Brothers

3. A father's proudest moment occurred in Alabama last month. Gregg Farnetti, football coach at West Blocton High since 1990 stepped down after the season finale but not before "the proudest moment of my life."

An extra point attempt near game's end sent No. 24 racing out to try the PAT. Kick was perfect. A sideline celebration included the coach hugging the kicker. No. 24 was Jodie Farnetti, coach's daughter who had "practiced and practiced," she said, "because I wanted to do something for my dad."

4. James Ramsey, Grace under fire. University of Louisville's President appeared thisclose to haggard in a news photo last week. His repeated apologizes for ethnic insensitivity elevated his dignity and made small the mob of sanctimonious critics too happy with sound of their own voices than accepting one and move on.

5. Ron Weaver. Fan in Bracken County represents all who send e-mails to by way of varied passion and techni-colored language, counsel me on how to write a column.

6. Opportunity to read The Natural Man authored by Brooksville native Ed McClanahan. I recommend it. Thanksgiving

7. Turkey dinner day after, what could be C-USA better than Hilltoppers (9-2) and Thundering Herd (9-2)?

8. Louisville-Kentucky Governor's Cup renewal has star power again and cha-ching incentives.

9. Cardinals, thumped at Pittsburgh, have state brag rights at stake, but 7-5 and winners of five of last six registers better than team with two-loss sputter at the

end to bowl officials.

• Wildcats (5-6), off a 58-point show have their mojo back? On the line: It's UofL, it's a bowl bid and, it's two more weeks to practice.

9. Alabama-Birmingham basketball coach Jerod Haase donated \$46,000 of his own salary to help pay for men's and women's programs' cost of attendance this year — \$23,000 to each program. Haase's salary? One million annually.

10. Northwestern Wildcats (9-2) are bowl bound again.

Ball coaches

11. Mark Stoops. Hammered on radio call-in show, Kentucky's coach insisted callers be allowed to howl no confidence.

12. Willie Taggart. Tampa area media and South Florida football fans have slammed ex-WKU coach for two seasons, but after the Bulls smashed Cincinnati 65-27 and post season play was possible, Taggart "ain't too bad."

13. Tweet from Bowling Green High football coach Kevin Wallace "... the past five seasons, BGHS is 67-3. That's a lot of good play by a lot of good players. Keep rollin'!" The Purples host Fern Creek this week in a state semi-final.

14. Godfather Dept. NBA Sacramento Kings owner Vivek Ranadive intends to make John Calipari "an offer he can't refuse" to become the Kings' next coach.

15. Another Kentucky-trounced-Duke is history. First rated entertainment ... for a night in November.

16. Tyler Ulis. Praise was too lavish, too widespread, too early and fool's gold. Thankfully, Kentucky's point guard will keep clear eyes, humble heart and play on.

17. Latest link to basket-

ball greatness in Kentucky, Louie Dampier is a Hall of Famer.

18. Kids in Kentucky harboring a Big Blue dream and in need of worthy role models — Alex Poythress and Derek Willis.

19. Just Wondering Dept. Will Katina Powell of UofL sex scandal fame, be among nominees for Kentucky sports person of the year?

20. Andre McGee and Jalen Rose (ESPN) remind us, by way of sex scandal and tawdry confession (Rose), a rotten underside of college sports remains.

21. Gary Pinkel. Soon to be ex-coach at Missouri, will stay near to show us what courage looks like after the cheering stops.

22. Wheels of Justice grand slowly. We're still waiting to see justice meted out to North Carolina athletics

23. Slightly altered quip from Twain: "It is by the goodness of the Almighty that in our Bluegrass State, I have three precious options:

- √ Freedom to criticize a ball coach.
- √ Liberty to poke fun with enthusiasm.
- √ And, willingness to risk doing both.

24. Personal spirit of Thanksgiving, we celebrated Mother's birthday. 96.

And, Seenager (Senior teenager). Have everything I wanted as a teenager, don't have to go to school or work; Receive an allowance (Social Security); own a driver's license, a car, have no curfew and own my place. And, I have an ID card to get into bars and saloons.

America! I love this place. Happy Thanksgiving.

And so it goes.

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