

Towles Is Leaving



Larry Vaught

Patrick Towles is leaving the University of Kentucky football program the same way he arrived — with class and dignity.

As a star at Highlands High School, Towles had his choice of many big-time programs but he had always been a Kentucky fan — so had his parents — and he verbally committed to UK coach Joker Phillips' program while he was still a junior in hopes of helping recruiting. He was expected by many to be the quarterback savior that the Kentucky football program desperately needed.

However, it never worked out quite that way and Sunday Towles announced he was going to transfer. Towles will complete his degree in political science in December, so he will have one season of eligibility remaining and can play immediately at any school now that he's been given his full release by Kentucky. I'm already hearing that Colorado State could be a likely landing spot for him.

"I would like to thank the University of Kentucky for giving me the opportunity to achieve my childhood dream of playing quarterback for the Wildcats," Towles said in a statement released by UK. "The last four years have been ones that I will truly cherish for the rest of my life. ... I will truly bleed blue 'til the day I die."

Towles has always said and done the right things. He survived being ignored by then offensive coordinator Randy Sanders his first season. The next year he was told by then offensive coordinator Neal Brown what he had to do to improve during a redshirt season, and he did it. He started in 2014 as a sophomore for Brown, who left after last season to become head coach at Troy. This season under new offensive coordinator Shannon Dawson he completed 183 of 326 passes (56.1 percent) for 2,148 yards and nine touchdowns. In his career, he completed 427 of 759 throws for 5,099 yards and 24 scores.

His 5,447 yards of total offense are the sixth-best in UK history behind Jared Lorenzen (10,637), Andre Woodson (8,870), Tim Couch (8,160), Mike Hartline (5,660) and Bill Ransdell (5,456).

I never once remember Towles making excuses or failing to show for an interview or answer difficult questions after losses. He never criticized teammates, even those who often dropped passes. He had the confidence in the preseason to predict that UK could get to the Southeastern Conference title game because he believed that much in his team.

He's a Kentucky kid who bled blue and lived his dream at UK for four years even when the times were difficult. He was loyal to Kentucky for four years and now it is time for him to put himself first and do what he needs that is best for him, not Kentucky.

Towles leaves knowing he did all he could for the Kentucky football program and here's hoping he finds success and happiness not only next year but for many, many years.

It was bad enough that Kentucky could not stop Louisville backup quarterback Lamar Jackson in last week's 38-24 loss to the Cardinals after UK

had a 21-0 lead 10 minutes into the game. Jackson ran for 186 yards and two scores on 17 carries — an average of 10.9 yards per try. He was only 8-for-21 passing but threw for 130 yards and another score.

So why couldn't UK stop him?

"They caught us off balance with the quarterback change. They made us look foolish at times," Kentucky coach Mark Stoops said.

Caught off balance? How could UK have not been ready for a quarterback who has played regularly for Louisville all season and started some games?

"We had some guys on the edge that were just getting outran and not playing with proper technique and not understanding where their help was within the defense. And he just flat out made some plays. He outran us and really made us look bad on the edge, on the perimeter on some plays," the coach said.

Two players worded it a bit differently.

"They just made adjustments and we didn't make the right adjustments. Jackson has a quick twitch and was hard to stop. They did a couple of things we did not see (in pregame preparation)," defensive end Farrington Huguenin said.

"With a scrambling quarterback you have got to adjust the defense and we did not make the adjustments," safety A.J. Stamps said.

Not making halftime adjustments is something UK struggled with all season on both defense and offense all season and a big reason UK was only 5-7 after a 4-1 start.

It wasn't just UK's defensive collapse, either. The offense was non-existent after the first quarter in quarterback Drew Barker's second start.

"I don't think at any (point) this year, we threw the ball like I'm used to throwing it," Dawson said. "There's just an unsettled-ness into our pass game right now that has to resolve itself for us to be good on offense. You gotta be able to throw and catch. If you can't throw and catch, especially in our offense, it limits you."

You think? However, it's more than throwing and catching. It's called coaching. However, Dawson constantly called plays that left many wondering why. Either Stoops didn't want him to run the offense and tempo Dawson said he would use or Dawson couldn't teach his players what to do.

Stoops said after the Louisville game he had confidence in Dawson and would not discuss possible staff changes for next year that he's obviously going to have to make.

"I'm obviously very frustrated with the result. And the result wasn't good enough, in my opinion. So I'm not pleased with the result. Five wins is not good enough. And I'm tired of the would've, could've, should've, just as the fans are. We've got to make those plays. And that's when our program will grow, when we make those plays to win games," Stoops said.

Wenyen Gabriel thought it would be "intriguing" to play at Kentucky after having coach John Calipari personally recruit him for months. That's why the 6-10 forward from Wilbraham & Monson (Mass.) signed with the Wildcats as part of Calipari's No. 1 recruiting class for next season.

"The positionless basketball he talks about is exactly what I wanted. I believe in what he is doing. It's really exciting to think about playing for him and how he will develop me. I want to show what I can do and it will be fun," said Gabriel.

"Everything I read and heard about Kentucky turned out to be true. Now I just want to be the best player I can be."

Even though his team lost

its season-opening game to Spain-based Canaria 59-56, Gabriel had 21 points, 11 rebounds and three blocked shots in the National Prep Showcase in Connecticut.

Gabriel and his teammates will be in Lexington Dec. 12 to play in the Thoroughbred Classic at Dunbar. Kentucky hosts Arizona State earlier that day.

"When I told him about it, his eyes got as big as they can be. You guys (in Kentucky) are going to love him," coach Mike Mannix said. "It's a great chance for us to play in a different part of the country and show our players what it is like to be around a top Division I program like Kentucky. We hope to check out at least some of the Kentucky-Arizona State game."

ESPN national recruiting director Paul Biancardi thinks Gabriel will fit nicely into the Kentucky program. He had a dominant summer on the adidas Gauntlet averaging 17.4 points and 8.6 rebounds per game and made the biggest jump in the ESPN rankings — 84th to 23rd — any player had ever made. He went from having scholarship offers to Providence and New Hampshire a year ago to picking UK over Duke.

"The third week in July he had a breakout performance in the Las Vegas adidas tournament and all the bluebloods got on him then. That's when he really got hot," Biancardi said. "He utilized his great length and reach to score and rebound. He played with tremendous energy and worked hard on the defensive end."

"He is a good athlete, but not a great athlete. He can shoot the jump shot or drive the ball. He can go inside and post up or jackknife his way to the rim. He is slender, but he is terrific on the glass."

Mannix said it was a case of Gabriel improving over the summer but also being undervalued going into summer play.

"I had continuously told school last year that I thought

they were missing the boat on him," Mannix said. "I was contacting a lot of mid-majors and some high majors because he only had a few low major offers. I was telling them he was 6-10 with a good foundation of perimeter skills and improved back to the basket game and would keep improving. But he also was not the player he is now. He really worked hard on his skills."

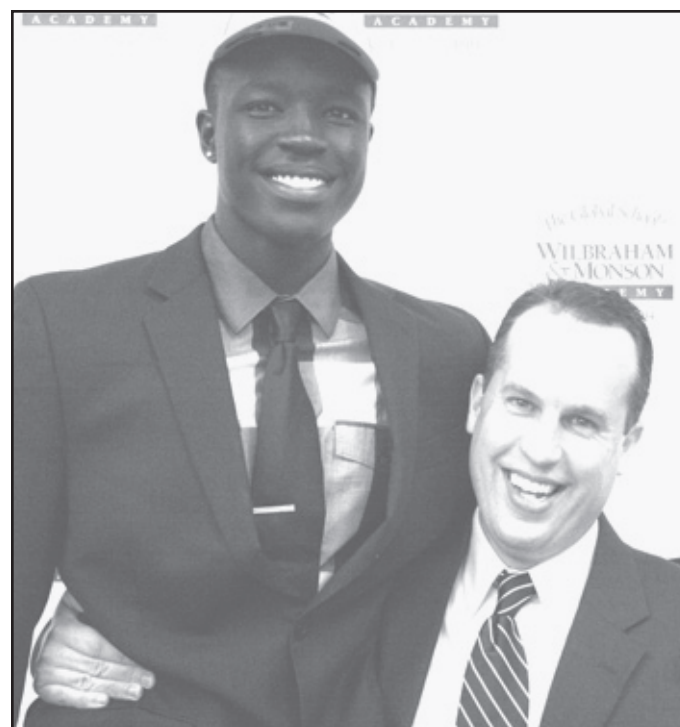
Gabriel, who is originally from South Sudan, is in his second season playing for Mannix. He repeated his junior year last season and Mannix remembers telling UK assistant Tony Barbee that in the spring Gabriel put in the time and effort that "I have seen NBA guys put in" during off-season workouts. He said Gabriel would go to the gym in the afternoons after class and then go to the weight room. Because he's an honor roll student, he could also check out of study hall at night and would go to the gym and make 100 3-point shots.

"During our season he shot the ball really well. There were a few games last year where he shot three 3-pointers in a game and was almost a 50 percent shooter in some games. He shot accurately, but not with as much confidence as he has now," Mannix said. "Last spring he just put in a ton of work to really get to the next level in terms of his perimeter jump shot and playing outside."

"I think Paul (Biancardi) hit it on the nose saying he is just as comfortable on the perimeter as in the post now. He future the majority of games will be on the perimeter because he creates so many matchup problems. His length to bother different guys on the perimeter is a huge asset."

Mannix said the way Calipari operates and presents the UK program separated UK from the rest of the schools with Gabriel.

"He felt a close connection to Cal even though they had talked only on the phone for a month and a half before Cal came here. When they sat



Kentucky signee Wenyen Gabriel and coach Mike Mannix will be in Lexington Saturday night for a game at Dunbar High School. Mannix said Gabriel put in NBA-like workouts to improve his game after last season.

down and talked, you would have never guessed it was the first time they had talked in person. It was just a natural fit," Mannix said.

"He has a good grasp of Kentucky basketball. Once he committed, we talked a lot about the history of the program and I told him about who was there before coach Cal. He knew all about the years with Cal, but I talked to him about the generations of different players and even brought up coach (Joe) Hall to him a little bit. I shared all the history and tradition I could."

Mannix recalled how excited Gabriel was during his signing ceremony at the school attended by 40 to 50 students and the same number of teachers, administrators and alumni.

"He had been through this whole recruiting process and it was somewhat tiring at times. He did enjoy it and the things that came with it when he did commit Oct. 1. He did interviews and felt the love from Kentucky fans. Signing was kind of like the cherry on top (of the ice cream)," the coach said.

"He's a kid that just gets it.

He has great social skills and is really personable. I would say he has a \$100 million dollar smile. I talk to him a lot about that smile. No matter what kind of day I am having, once he walks in and smiles 99 times out of 100 it will make me forget how busy I am or how crazy things are."

Mannix took Gabriel and another teammate out for dinner with his wife and two sons after Gabriel signed with Kentucky.

"He's just like a family member. He is engaged in what you are doing. His phone was going off like crazy, but he was not glued to the phone. He was talking to us, talking to my sons. He shared food with them," Mannix said. "He's just great to have around and Kentucky fans will love him. He lets me coach him and I try my best just to let him play. It works out pretty well for us both that way, too."

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

Louisville hands (total collapse) Kentucky a good ole Happy Chandler whuppin'



Bob Watkins

Governor's Cup. In boxing parlance, Louisville was staggered by early haymakers, made a no-brainer change at quarterback, collected its wits and, while the Wildcats grew Fathead, the Petrinos rope-a-doped Kentucky the rest of the day.

At the end it was a Happy Chandler-style down-in-the-dirt on Satdee morning whuppin'. UofL brag rights spans an Obama Administration, UofL headed up I-64 leaving Mark Stoops to face funeral music again.

Mark Stoops: "We had guys in position and they made us look foolish at times."

The latter was more persuasive than the former. In time and places this season Florida, Eastern Kentucky (OT escape), Auburn and Vanderbilt made Kentucky look foolish. The others. Mississippi State, Tennessee and Georgia simply beat the bejeebers out of Stoops' team.

Kentucky finishes 5-7. To be merciful, we hope its season is finished. Grade for 2015? In **bold face**, a solid **F**.

Louisville (7-5) is bowl-bound, but the only thing special about this team will be a bowl game win. Six of UofL's seven wins came against opponents with losing records.

MARCH TO MARCH BEGINS

Flyweights, and Dookies, inked into the left-hand column, it's December — Kentucky and Louisville began their march to March this week. Best so far? Maybe these things.

Kentucky's swift boat move past Carolina to top of the polls. But our state's gazillion assistant coaches know what too early means and know there are half dozen teams as good or better than the Wildcats.

Louisville (media), reasoned earlier this week that sex scandal is why Cards have gotten no ranking from pollsters. Couldn't have anything to do with departure of four starters and the scrimmage-caliber schedule, could it?

Teams magazine writers and talking head experts left out of preseason promos: Miami, Fla. Xavier and the Monmouth Hawks.

FIRE THE COACH? NADA!

Cardinal Nation ... predictable tweet crowed out soon after 38-24.

"UK is just the third best football program in Kentucky," it said. "The (Wildcats) are 0-5 against the Ville and 0-2 against WKU. They may be in the SEC but in name only, Kentucky plays like a MAC or Sun Belt team in football."

For Kentucky fans, like a cowboy said once, "Smarts, don't it?"

But, firing Mark Stoops won't happen. Would be re-run of paying two head coaches at same time again. UK fans can stir sanity into their Patience cocktail, while watching wacko boosters at LSU and Georgia make fools of themselves.

Stoops signed on for five seasons and deserves at least four given slower-than-hoped pace of progress. Staff or re-staff changes are his call.

Next? Will be interesting to see the effectiveness of He who must hump the (recruiting) boulder up the mountain, and pitches his product.

Dividend for fans? A hike in ticket prices or fees to access them, Mitch Barnhart wouldn't dare.

JUST WONDERING DEPT.

Mark Stoops had done his Man-Up session with media Saturday, trying desperately I imagine, to dance away from ugly words **total collapse**. Best he had was a word Kentucky fans have lived with since Stoll Field was standing and Harry Truman was President, Frustration.

I got wondering about UK players inside. Had they paused, rubbed steam off locker room mirrors and looked at themselves?

Total collapse indeed? **look-at-me** selfishness, blatant disrespect for coaches,

teammates and all but one fan.

Among player reflections we can be sure, can't we, the **players will own ...**

√ A season of poor passes thrown that drove one quarterback to pack his bags.

√ A season of dropped passes ... holding penalties ... illegal procedure ... substitution and play clock issues, and poor secondary play.

√ And, Matt Elam is too fat, looks too satisfied. A nose guard, Elam is earning himself a place at offensive guard to pass protect.

BEST OF BEST

Our Commonwealth's best college football team for 2015? Western Kentucky (10-2) by a mile. The Hilltoppers lost at Indiana by a hiccup, were shelled at LSU and nobody else was close. WKU hosts C-USA title game at home this week.

Dream bowl game match? One to make a hot ticket and SRO crowd?

Music City Bowl at Nissan Stadium in Nashville, December 30: Louisville (7-5) versus Western Kentucky (ideally 11-2).

PARTING SHOT

On set of Yuletide season brings to mind the nominees list for Kentucky Sports Person of 2015. Qualifications include, don't they, level of media attention, fan interest? Atop my list: Brandon Doughty, WKU; IA. Katina Powell (Louisville).

And so it goes.

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