

# Kentucky-Louisville Game



Larry Vaught

What many Kentucky or Louisville basketball fans would like for Christmas is to have a win in Saturday's UK-Louisville game in Rupp Arena in the annual Battle of the Bluegrass. It's a game that five months ago seemed like one where Kentucky would be a solid favorite. Now with the way both teams are playing, Kentucky fans have a lot more reasons to worry and Louisville fans have a lot more reason to be optimistic.

In fact, after UK's loss to Ohio State Saturday, it's easy to make a case for why Louisville should be favored — something no one would have thought possible when the season started.

So who will win? What will be the keys to the game? Who has to play well for the Cats to win?

I asked those questions and more to several state media friends because I thought you would appreciate their thoughts/insights.

**Question:** Have your thoughts about this year's Kentucky-Louisville game changed since the season started?

**Ryan Lemond, Kentucky Sports Radio:** "Absolutely. Before the season started, I thought UK might run Louisville 'off the floor.' I thought UK had way superior talent, and Louisville's talent was gonna be way down. Now I still believe UK has the superior talent, but Louisville is much better than I thought. Damian Lee is better than I thought. Louisville's mixture of big guys is better than I thought. I now firmly believe it's going to be a much closer game that I would have predicted back in October."

**Larry Glover, LarryGloverLive (WVLK 590 AM):** "I never thought it would be a blowout but I was always confident that UK would win. I still think UK probably wins but it won't be a shock if the Cards steal one."

**Keith Taylor, Kentucky Forward:** "Yes, especially from Louisville's perspective. Even with a soft non-conference schedule, I thought the Cardinals would struggle early, especially with the allegations surrounding the program. Although he's maintained a low profile, especially with the media, Rick Pitino has done a solid job keeping focused on the task at hand. I thought this was a sure UK win in the preseason, but it will turn out to be a close game and a test for both teams."

**Tyler Thompson, Kentucky Sports Radio:** "Definitely, but just because Louisville is much better than I originally thought. Fifth-year transfers Damian Lee and Trey Lewis quickly adapted to Rick Pitino's system, and the Cards are shooting and defending really well, albeit against mostly far inferior opponents. This game went from one I didn't worry about at all for Kentucky to one that, given UK's woes recently, is pretty concerning."

**Mark Buerger, WLAP Sunday Morning Sports:** "A little bit. After Kentucky ran Duke and Louisville struggled early, I thought

this would be another easy UK win. I still think Kentucky has better personnel, but I'm not sure they're all ready to play at the level that the U of L game usually requires."

**Dorian Craft, WLEX-TV sports anchor:** "I think it will be a more difficult game than people originally anticipated. Louisville has been playing well, and played Michigan State tough a few weeks ago. How will the injury to Mathiang impact the Cardinals? We'll have to wait and see. Speaking of wait and see, I think it will depend on what Kentucky team, and which Jamal Murray, shows up. If the Wildcats can put together two consistent halves similar to what we saw in the latter stages of the loss to Ohio State, I think Kentucky pulls out a close one at home against Louisville."

**Question:** What will be the biggest key to the game for both teams?

**Lemond:** "Louisville definitely has the size advantage. If their 'big butt' guys can dominate in the paint and somehow get Marcus Lee and Alex Poythress in foul trouble ... UK better look out. I feel like the whole key is the bigs. Louisville can throw four or five bigs at UK, and you know they are going to come right at Skal (Labissiere) and try to get him flustered or sent to the bench. That's why Marcus and Alex are so vital for UK. They have to stay on the floor, and they have to play well. U of L has 20-25 fouls to give, and you can guarantee Rick Pitino is gonna use everyone one of them."

**Glover:** "For UK, handling the physical nature of the game. It's no secret that UK is a finesse team and the Cards will certainly test UK's toughness. For UofL, they cannot get in foul trouble. If Damian Lee is saddled with foul trouble, UofL can't win."

**Taylor:** "Louisville will need to get solid performances from its top players, seniors Damian Lee and Trey Lewis, along with contributions from in-state players Ray Spalding and Quinton Snyder. As usual, Tyler Ulis has to play well for the Wildcats, while Skal Labissiere will need to step it up in the post for Kentucky to have somewhat of an edge underneath. The Wildcats have struggled with 3-pointers and will need to shoot well behind the arc to add to their arsenal, especially against its rival."

**Thompson:** "For Kentucky, it's the same issue that's plagued them all year: the Cats must be stronger inside. Louisville is the best offensive rebounding team in the country and the Cats can ill afford to give them any second chances. Louisville also boasts a top ten defense, so Kentucky must finish at the rim, which hasn't been easy for them this season."

"For Louisville to win, they have to contain Kentucky in transition. This UK team is best when they're running, and for the Cards to have a shot, they need to limit the lobs and fast breaks."

**Buerger:** "For Kentucky, keeping Poythress and Lee on the court. Neither of them can get in to foul trouble and miss a lot of minutes. Without them, Kentucky gets too vulnerable inside. For Louisville, I think it's trying to limit Kentucky's guards. If Murray and Briscoe get rolling, I think UK is in pretty good shape."

**Craft:** "Turnovers and free throws. You know this is going to be a physical contest with the way these

two teams feel about one another, and I can't see either team missing an opportunity to lay a little extra weight into their opponent. With Kentucky struggling from the free throw line so far this season, getting points at the charity stripe will be especially important for UK in this game. Taking care of the ball will also be key. Turnovers (usually) lead to free and easy points, which is something that neither team can afford to give away."

**Question:** What Kentucky player has to play especially well for the Wildcats to win?

**Lemond:** "I think it's gotta be Alex Poythress. He is the only real physical presence UK has inside, and I'm certain U of L is going to try and take advantage of that. If Alex plays the way he has been lately, UK is in good shape. But we say what happened out at UCLA when Marcus Lee got hurt and Alex was on the bench in foul trouble — the Cats had no inside presence at all. Zero! Alex was the hero in the Louisville game in the NCAA Tournament two seasons ago. I hope he can do the same thing at Rupp this season."

**Glover:** "UK's guards will be fine, but the key for the Cats is Marcus Lee. If he can give UK a double-double, the Cats should be fine."

**Taylor:** "I believe Skal Labissiere will have to play at a higher level for Kentucky to win. Labissiere has shown flashes, but will need to be a dominate force in the paint. Kentucky's post play has been a big difference in this game during the past few seasons and that hasn't changed."

**Thompson:** "Normally against Louisville, I would say Alex Poythress because Alex always plays

well against the Cards, but this year I'm going with Isaiah Briscoe. Briscoe has emerged as Calipari's new lockdown defender and may get the task of guarding Damian Lee, Louisville's top scorer. Briscoe shined shutting down Duke's Grayson Allen, so if he can contain Lee, Kentucky's chances of winning will be much, much better."

**Buerger:** "Ulis. He was a major factor in last year's game and he should be again this time around. If he can keep the offense running smoothly and hold his ground well enough of the defensive end, Kentucky wins."

**Craft:** "Jamal Murray. The Wildcats need to the Jamal Murray that showed up for the final 20 minutes of the game against Ohio State to be there from the start against Louisville. I think at this point in time, you can't depend on Skal Labissiere for quality minutes, and you need to start looking elsewhere for a difference maker until he's further along in his development. I think the X factor could also be the play of Marcus Lee, if Louisville focuses on shutting down Murray after watching his 33-point performance Saturday."

**Question:** Finally, who wins the game and why?

**Lemond:** "Kentucky wins an ugly/brutal game 72-64."

**Glover:** "UK wins but it won't be easy. UofL likes to force guards into mistakes and that will be really hard against the best backcourt in the country. Also, keep an eye out for Poythress. I think Alex could have a couple of emotional plays to keep the fans stoked. UK 77-Louisville 71."

**Taylor:** "I think Kentucky wins the game in a close one, 72-65. The



Kentucky Sports Radio's Ryan Lemond thinks Alex Poythress (22) is the key for Kentucky against Louisville Saturday. "He is the only real physical presence UK has inside, and I'm certain U of L is going to try and take advantage of that," Lemond said. (Vicky Graff Photo)

homecourt is obviously an advantage and the Wildcats have an edge on the perimeter with their guard play. Again, UK's bigs will need to play well for the Wildcats to keep the winning streak against the Cardinals alive."

**Thompson:** "If Kentucky can push past their shooting issues and own the paint, they'll win by ten. If not, it will be an ugly game, but in Rupp against Louisville under Calipari, I never pick against the Cats."

**Buerger:** "Kentucky wins. They have better players. They're at home. And I'll believe Pitino is beating Cal again the next time I see it happen."

**Craft:** "I'm going to be a optimist and say Kentucky. I think the injury to Mathiang really works in our favor, otherwise I'd be concerned about our ability to contain him in the post."

It's not going to be an easy victory, though. Rick Pitino will have his guys gunning for Kentucky and the Wildcat freshman haven't experienced this rivalry yet, and I expect the early going to be rough before their nerves and adrenaline calm down and they start to settle in."

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Hope all of you have a great Christmas. Thanks so much for letting me share University of Kentucky information and being part of your day once each week. Again, feel free to contact me at larryvau@gmail.com with any questions/suggestions.

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If you are a reader of the columns by Bob Watkins and Larry Vaught in The Estill County Tribune, please let us know what you think by sending an email to <news@estilltribune.com>

## Bob Watkins' Sports In Kentucky

### Candidate for happiest Christmas of my Life? Here's a vote for Richie Farmer



Bob Watkins

Twelve days of Christmas, plus a doz.

In the spirit of a season cheerful, hopeful and optimistic, Happy Christmas.

- I hope you celebrate the dearest, most precious gift above all things, good health.

- May your best memories come home to center stage with a musical medley — laughter, gratitude, story telling and this grand reality: "I am an American."

Humbly then, here are a few baubles ...

**1. Happiest Christmas of his life?** Steve Spurrier, retired coach at South Carolina? Or, Bo Ryan, retired coach at Wisconsin?

Maybe both, but neither can be more special than ...

**2. Richie Farmer.** When President Barack Obama commuted sentences of 95 federal prisoners last week and pardoned two more, it brought to mind our one-time high school basketball hero and player at Kentucky. Richie Farmer was released last Friday.

Forgiveness, second chances, a clean slate ... *America, I love this place.*

**3. Linda Ellerbee.** Among finest journalists in half century and a career-long hero of mine, retired

at 71 December 15. Her last Nick News for kids on Nickelodeon, was Ellerbee-appropriate titled, "Hello, I Must Be Going."

I discovered Ellerbee in the 1970s on NBC's Weekend, then Overnight with co-anchor Lloyd Dobyns. Using author Kurt Vonnegut's original, Ellerbee wrote a best seller in 1986 titled *And So it Goes*.

Her style was keen on fairness, candor and honesty.

Linda Ellerbee, best of the best, merry Christmas.

**4. Shannon Dawson.** "No hard feelings" departure from University of Kentucky, was soothed by a stream of Christmas checks from Mitch Barnhart — \$550,000-a-year (that's \$4,583-a-month) through 2018. Until or if Dawson takes a new job.

**5. Patrick Towles.** New slate, new town, new league, all new people. The very best to Boston College's newest quarterback candidate.

**6. Skal Labissiere.** For a skinny 19-year-old (turns 20 March 18) leave big money and glam talk to agents and rating services, and embrace: "It's the journey, not the destination. In realm of Time there are no guarantees. Joy is in this moment, not a time-line to the finish."

**7. Eddie Gran.** Job jump from Cincinnati to Lexington? Reportedly replacement for Shannon Dawson at Kentucky, has a resumé to sell tickets at Commonwealth — "up-tempo and pass-throw offense."

**8. UK basketball traditionalists and One-and-Done compromisers,** a bit of Christmas unity: "We don't know what we have

until we've lost it, but it's also true we don't know what we've been missing until we have it."

**9. Gift.** For Louisville basketball fans, "soon after Missouri KC and Utah Valley ... some hoops worthy of devotion and dollars spent to watch."

**10. Gift. Louisville at Kentucky.** For fans across the Commonwealth and beyond, Cardinals and Wildcats at the brink of showing a national television audience (CBS) what constitutes a Rivalry.

**11. Tubby Smith.** Wasn't there discussion back there about running up a banner at Rupp Arena to celebrate one of the finest ball coaches in school history?

**12. Worth Repeating.** The man who dares to waste one hour of his life has not discovered the value of it. — Charles Darwin

**13. Mark Stoops.** Enlightenment to make a creative hire or two that works for a change.

**14. Mike Krzyzewski.** A mirror. With words Sold Out at the bottom.

**15. Antidote please** for that sinking feeling when ESPN analyst introduction time comes and its Dick Vitale.

**16. Gift.** Get Duke out of Durham, Carolina out of Chapel Hill and Dick Vitale on a flight to Minot, North Dakota, and college hoops on Saturday would be fun.

**17. Tom Izzo.** IS a Christmas gift for college purists.

**18. Dan Dakich, ESPN.** Another rung up the ladder of 'Opinionators' who antagonize homers and delights the rest of us.

**19. Darrin Horn.** If there were an award in college hoops for Landing-on-

your-Feet decision-making, the perfect candidate is the first-year assistant coach at Texas.

**20. Gift. Matt Bush,** No. 1 pick in 2004 baseball draft, walked out of prison the other day into a million-dollar minimum contract with the Texas Rangers. Served 3-and-half years for a drunken driving accident in Florida.

**21. Dan Shaughnessy,** Merry Christmas. Boston Globe columnist laid a little tough love on readers, before John Calipari was fawned over at UMass. "What an embarrassment for our state university. You'd think our UMass officials would have as much good sense as the president of the University of Memphis, who canceled a Cal celebration after initially thinking it would be a good idea to honor college basketball's all-time bag man"

**22. Reaction of Kentucky fans-in-denial?** Demonize the messenger. Shaughnessy "must be a hater."

**23. Dream.** If you're like me at Christmas time, missing a friend or pal so much that you'd like to lift him or her out of a dream and hug 'em to make up for all the times you didn't, Merry Christmas.

And ...

**24. "When Christmas bells** are swinging above fields of snow we hear sweet voices ringing from lands long ago. Etched upon vacant places are half-forgotten faces of friends we used to cherish, and loves we used to know." — Ella Wheeler Wilcox

And so it goes.  
Merry Christmas.  
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