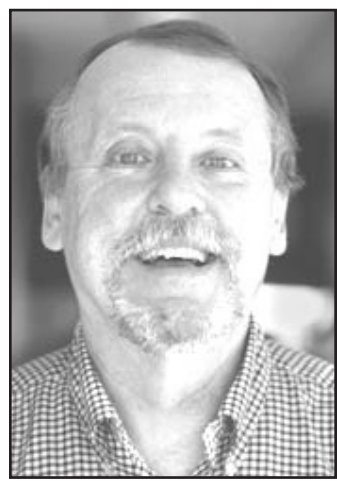


# Towles Was Never Me-First



Larry Vaught

From the time he started playing sports, Patrick Towles was never a me-first athlete. No matter what sport he was playing, he was always team-first.

Now for the first time, he's had to make a selfish decision and put what is best for him first.

That's why he decided when the University of Kentucky's football season ended that he would not return for his final season. Instead, the quarterback who grew up dreaming of playing for UK and started 22 straight games in 2014-15 will transfer for his last season.

"I did have to be selfish, which made the decision easier," said Towles. "That hurts me to even say that. I love this place and love all about it and love my teammates. But I have got to recognize what I feel I am called to do in the future and doing that leads to changes."

He will be eligible to play immediately at another FBS school next season as a graduate transfer.

Several schools have shown interest in Towles. He finished his UK career with 5,009 passing yards and 5,452 yards of total offense, the sixth-highest totals in program history. He threw 24 touchdowns and 24 interceptions with 11 rushing touchdowns.

He was benched in favor of redshirt freshman Drew Barker in last season's final two games.

Towles completed 56.1 percent of his passes for 2,148 yards, nine touchdowns and 14 interceptions in 11 games in 2015.

He says has "two or three" schools he's looked at the closest and should have an announcement soon.

"I have one shot at it. I have 12 games left to convince NFL scouts that I am worth an investment," Towles said. "I have some tape. I had the honor of starting 22 games here at Kentucky. I've got to add to that tape and put some good games out there and some wins on the table and see what happens."

Kentucky started the 2014 season 5-1 but finished 5-7. This year the Cats started 4-1 but again finished 5-7. That led to a lot of fan criticism, especially for Towles.

"You've got to roll with the punches and move on," the quarterback said. "It was super hard on my parents. The criticism, and I understand you are a SEC quarterback and in Lexington it's a fishbowl where everybody knows everything. When people says stuff about me, I understand. But my family hurts for me. They are not excited about me leaving. They live in Paris now. I have never been more than hour away from my parents in my life. But they know this is the right move."

He says he knows there were "Towles' loyalists" that he's appreciative of and that includes some media members he felt treated him fairly from high school until now.

"People have always had my back. Those are the kind of guys in the media that when stuff was getting bad, they didn't just throw me under the bus. They were fair. Some guys just never put me under that bus. God willing,

if I play in the NFL some day, I will remember that kind of stuff and who I developed good relationships with. My family is very appreciative of the way a lot of fans and some media members treated me and it did not go unnoticed," Towles said.

"I will be a fan of Kentucky the rest of my life. I know how Kentucky fans are. I am one of them. I appreciate how passionate they are. I got a ton of great feedback from fans and a lot of people continue to support me. I appreciate that."

Towles was a major catch for then Kentucky coach Joker Phillips when he verbally committed early after leading Highlands to a second straight state championship as a junior. He added another one as a senior.

Former NFL star receiver Cris Collinsworth predicted college greatness for Towles. So did former UK quarterback Jared Lorenzen. However, Towles' first year he never clicked with offensive coordinator Randy Sanders, who often ignored him on the sideline during games. The next year Mark Stoops took over from Phillips and Neal Brown was the new offensive coordinator. He told Towles what he had to do improve during a redshirt season. Towles started 12 games in 2014 under Brown.

"No doubt about it. I got a lot better my redshirt year," Towles said. "I was sad to see coach Brown go after my sophomore year. But I was happy for him because he got a head coaching job (at Troy). But no matter what, I wanted to play here my whole life and I always told myself that even if I was not good enough to play, I was not going anywhere. That has changed."

When Brown left, Stoops brought in Shannon Dawson as offensive coordinator and Towles won a preseason competition with Barker and started the first 10 games. Neither Brown or Dawson used the "pro-style" offense that Phillips ran with Sanders when Towles was recruited. Yet Towles says playing in a pro-style offense is not a given in where he'll decide to play next season.

"I wasn't necessarily happy with the way things were going," Towles, who says he likely would have transferred even if he had not lost his starting job, said. "Despite what some people might think, I am a huge supporter of coach Brown and coach Dawson. But you have got to have a full-scale commitment around the program and I do not think there was. Those guys gave me a chance to play and start. I appreciate them."

"There are just other factors that did not necessarily allow me to be as successful as I could and they are out of my control. If you had told me I would start two years and then leave for my fifth year, I would have said you are crazy. But I recognize the situation for me here is not as prolific and auspicious as I would like it to be. I just had to make the best decision for me."

He's got advice from his grandfather Jim Bunning, a former U.S. Senator and Major League Baseball Hall of Famer.

He told Towles to follow his heart and gut — the same things he did in sports and politics.

"He has not tried to sway me one way. He just wants me to do what is good for me," Towles said. "He has been there, done that. He's thrown a no-hitter at Fenway Park (in Boston). He's had a perfect game in New York (for the Yankees). It's not like he is a crazy grandpa talking. He has done things as a competitor that I want to do.

"I take everything that he says to heart. I remember we had lunch at Frisch's before the season started and he was talking about the attitude it took on the field to be successful. There was never a doubt about what type competitor he was. If I continue to adopt his competitive edge, I should be successful. I remember that daily."

Wenyn Gabriel has never had any doubts about his decision to play at Kentucky. But the Massachusetts prep standout felt even better after scoring 24 points and grabbing 10 rebounds in a win in Lexington Saturday a few hours after he watched the Wildcats beat Arizona State in Rupp Arena.

"I've always felt really great about my decision so I don't know how much better I can feel about that," Gabriel said. "I've never been at a game like that at Rupp. I don't know if there's a place better. That's why I'm really excited about my decision."

"I don't think I could fit better anywhere else in the country. I think this is a place where I can develop and get more development than I could get anywhere else. Playing against all these players every day and all the competition, that's where I really thrive."

He helped take over the game against 7-foot Thon Maker and Athletes Institute of Canada in the second half Saturday night to make his trip to Kentucky even better.

"It's exciting to be here in Lexington. It's where I'll be next year. Having all the fans come and watch. But I was just anxious to win this game. I'm just happy we came through. I didn't play that well, but we kept playing hard so I'm happy we came back," Gabriel, a power forward, said. "I was just trying

to stay focused on the game. The attention is nice and all. I like it here. Basketball is really big over here.

"A lot of people want to take pictures, autographs and all that. It's something different from where I'm from. It's different but I like it."

Kentucky freshman Skal Labissiere's struggles have drawn so much attention that even Towles — who knows plenty about taking criticism — says he feels sorry for Labissiere and those close to him.

"I feel for him. So much is being put on him and now he is not always able to execute like he wants and not anybody understands he is still trying as hard as you can," Towles said. "That can be hard on you and your family and friends."

Labissiere did not have a point or rebound in last week's win over Arizona State. It was a continuation of a recent slump that has left coach John Calipari and UK fans frustrated.

Labissiere came here from Haiti and settled in Memphis with guardian Richard Hamilton and his family. He missed his high school junior season with an injury and then was ruled ineligible for his senior season after transferring to a new school. That left Hamilton to put together a travel team that had little talent except Labissiere.

Now despite his superb offensive skills for a 7-foot player, Labissiere is struggling to be productive and regain his confidence.

"That happens your freshman year. You come in with a huge head. I personally did, I know I did. It's kind of a reality check. Then once you get the reality check and once you know that your team is behind you, you're going to



Patrick Towles grew up a Kentucky fan and never imagined a day would come when he would start 22 games a sophomore and junior and then transfer somewhere else for his final year as he is now doing. (Vicky Graff Photo)

do fine," junior Marcus Lee said.

Lee said he has told Labissiere his problems are "normal" for freshmen at UK.

"That's kind of what he has to realize, is that we're all going through this. Especially since it's Skal, we're pushing him toward such a high standard that if he's anything short from that then he's getting yelled at. That's what he doesn't realize yet, is that he has to go at everything so hard and that's what we're just teaching," Lee said. "Because everybody's going to go at him. He's the top one or two pick (in the 2016 NBA draft). He's the bar that's been set and he has to figure that out. He'll do great at that."

Another player who understands confidence problems is junior Derek Willis, who got to play more than normal against Arizona State because of Labissiere's problems.

"He just needs to work through it and keep going to the gym and keep working. That's just how you get better. Just keep working. It's

still early, and he's a young kid who hasn't done this much before so it's all new to him. He'll get it down," Willis said.

Freshman guard Jamal Murray has had his own consistency issues. He says Labissiere is "one of a kind on offense" and just needs to focus on rebounding.

"He just needs to fight, get in the paint and grab rebounds for us," Murray said. "Cal is just getting him to get more rebounds, getting him to fight and be more aggressive. Hit somebody. That's the only thing with him. His offensive skill set is like no other. He gets the basketball, if he shoots it, you know it's probably going to be a good basket."

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## Bob Watkins' Sports In Kentucky

### Navy-Army still the best; Is UK's Skal Labissiere the black dot?



Bob Watkins

Saturday's Navy-Army game — as it always does, set the bar. In spite of a notch-down-in-talent and with no emphasis on time-in-the-40 ... here is best game of the season.

Based on what? Tradition and patriotism to be sure as we looked into a sea of young lieutenants-to-be faces. More, it reminds us of discipline, passionate and honorable play governed by mutual respect and sportsmanship. Too many of us have forsaken the best in us as fans for selfish end zone celebration, macho targeting, brute force, show-off and gloat-over the vanquished in games across college football map.

Try and imagine Alabama and Auburn teams singing the school song to each the other's fans after an Iron Bowl. These days, fans seem to enjoy more hating on each other.

Meanwhile, Army and Navy is about decorum, honor for winners, respect for the beaten, and let's play again next season.

#### A SKAL STORY

A college professor was about to hand out papers for an examination. On each student's desk he placed the test face down. When

students were instructed to turn their papers over, all were the same. White sheet of paper with a single black dot.

"I want you to write about what you see," he told them.

Near end of class time, the professor retrieved the papers and was not surprised to see his students had written about the same thing. The black dot. How big, how small, where it was positioned on the paper. The vast white area had been ignored.

"This is what we do in life," the professor told them. "We have so much white space to observe and enjoy yet too often we concentrate on the black spot."

The little anecdote brought to mind Skal Labissiere at Kentucky. Media's woe-is-me analysis and Wildcat fans hand-wringing about the dot was all the rage last week. Trials and travails of one skinny 18-year-old while the team has nine wins in 10 games, ranked fourth headed to Christmas, and a premier six-man recruiting class signed for next year including four large one-and-done prospects to replace Labissiere the black dot, ready or not.

#### SKINNY KID REALITY

It is adequate to say, seems to me, that Labissiere has half dozen opportunities at hand to learn from during this period of his education.

1. Alex Poythress. Adjusted to inflated expectations, survived career altering injury, and over five years, learned to handle a middle aged man screaming into his face.

2. Derek Willis. Adjust-

ed to how-high-the (prima donna)-bar, learned patience and being recruited over. Today, averaging 11.8 minutes playing time, and the middle age man screaming into his face is saying "shoot the ball!"

3. Bump-and-grind with Issac Humphries and Tai Wynyard.

4. Time to gain 30 pounds and chance to enjoy a walk across campus.

5. Time to let experts and wannabe(s) to clamor about money.

6. And, traffic jam. Reasons "ya better get it in gear, kid, 'cause you're gonna be expendable," are spelled: Bam Adebayo, 6-9, Sachya Killeby-Jones is 6-10, Wenyn Gabriel is 6-9, Issac Humpries is 7-0 and Tai Wynyard is 6-9.

#### KENTUCKY-LOUISVILLE

Little more than a week away from Cards-Wildcats at Rupp Arena day-after-Christmas.

To date: Kentucky is a collection of rookies who transition well, are not bashful about "puttin' 'er up!" but can't shoot straight from field or foot line.

To date: Louisville, as is November-December tradition, has played a long list of nobody and mostly at home, along with a loss at Michigan State.

Beating the daylights out of ill-matched Hartford, Samford, Kennesaw State and others does nothing for its RPI and is not about padding Pitino's win list, but is all about making UofL's guard play more exquisite than it is already and Da Coach growing his Bigs, developing them for combat to come.

But one road game at East Lansing seems to be

not adequate preparation for the Rupp Arena experience.

#### HEISMAN TROPHY

Derrick Henry is a worthy Heisman Trophy holder, I suppose. He was best player to receive a lion's share of media ga-ga over five months.

Says here, three student-athletes with equally impressive on-field numbers, to go with academic achievement, who received virtually no national media ballyhoo compared to Henry, were quarterback Brandon Doughty at Western Kentucky University; running back Christian McCaffrey at Stanford and quarterback Keenan Reynolds at Navy.

Footnote. Doughty's name was first on my Heisman ballot.

#### BEST IN THE COMMONWEALTH AT CHRISTMAS?

That Georgetown College takes a glossy record into Christmas break is less a surprise than statistical reality the Tigers have scored 100-or-more points mark eight times and 90s twice. Georgetown is 13-0.

Coach Chris Briggs' team is led by 6-8, 260-pound Deondre McWhorter who averages better than 19 points and nine rebounds; Noah Cottrill provides 17.5 points and shoots almost 50 per cent from 3-point line (29 of 59).

#### PARTING SHOT

Keeping with the sweet spirit of the season, this: "The good man is the friend of all living things. — Mahatma Gandhi.

And so it goes. You can reach me at <bob.Watkins24@aol.com>