

Loves Playing In Kentucky



Larry Vaught

No one enjoyed being at the Marshall County Hoop Fest last week more than 6-10 power forward Billy Preston of Advance Prep International of Dallas.

"I love playing at Kentucky. We came last year came to play at McCracken County. I loved both experiences. I love how the fans and whole city comes out," said Preston. "Playing on ESPN is special and a blessing for a high school kid to be on national TV. It is exciting and I love exciting games, so it is all good for me."

Preston, a junior, has a bevy of scholarship offers from schools such as Arizona State, Baylor, Connecticut, Fresno State, Kansas, New Mexico State, Oregon, UCLA, Southern Cal and Utah. Most recruiting analysts think Preston, a California native, will stay in the west to play college basketball.

However, he said during Hoop Fest that Kentucky is still on his radar.

"Me personally, I have not heard anything (from Kentucky) but my parents have talked to the coaching staff there. What I have been told, but I am not sure, is that Kentucky doesn't recruit players until end of their junior year. I am not saying that is what it is. I am just not sure," the athletic Preston said. "I just keep working on my game. It would be a blessing to be recruited by Kentucky. What player wouldn't want to be recruited by them? I just keep working and hope they start recruiting me hard."

Preston considers UK one of the top schools in the country and says any player would have interest in coach John Calipari's team. Calipari came to Marshall County to watch him and others play Sunday.

"It is Kentucky. When you think of college basketball, Kentucky is definitely one of the teams you immediately think about. Last year they went 38-0 and the amount of professional basketball players they produce each year, you have to know about Kentucky," Preston said. "You can't not know about Kentucky. It would be a blessing to be recruited by that school."

API coach Ray Forsett calls Preston a "big-time talented kid" and says there is little he cannot do on the court.

"He can handle, shoot, pass, rebound, do it all. That helps us win," Forsett said. "When he is locked in, we are locked in and it makes us a better team. Just like every kid, he has to work on playing hard every play. Everybody can always work on shooting the ball better. For the most part, he is a

great talent but still a work in progress. If he would play hard every play, I don't think anybody in the country could stop him."

ESPN national recruiting director Paul Biancardi, who worked two games shown on ESPN at Hoop Fest, says there is no junior in the country more talented than Preston.

"He is so gifted. He can pass, handle, shoot, push the ball, rebound, block shots, anything. But he doesn't always play with a high motor, doesn't always practice well. That's why he has ups and downs," Biancardi said. "But he can flat-out dominate games when he plays." His teammate, junior point guard Trevon Duval, is ranked the best at his position in the 2017 recruiting class and in the top five by many recruiting analysts.

While he does not yet have a scholarship offer from Kentucky, he noted in a recent blog he wrote for USA Today that Kentucky has played well and he said here Thursday night that UK has stayed in contact.

"They contact me every so often. I am interested in Kentucky like a lot of other schools because they are a really good school and produce professionals," the 6-3 Duval said.

He also knows UK freshman Isaiah Briscoe well.

"He always talks to me about Kentucky and how he has improved and how he likes it," Duval said. "I knew Isaiah would do pretty good. He has tenacity to work hard and be better than whoever he has to go against. I knew he would rise to the occasion. He never lacks confidence, either. One of his biggest skills is being really confident."

He says Kentucky is a school he "definitely" plans to visit.

"Coach (John) Calipari is really confident in his players and what he does. He also gets players to the NBA. I like that," Duval said.

Duval is a confident player, too. He considers himself the best player in his recruiting class.

"I would say getting inside the lane and creating for teammates inside the defense is what I do best," he said. "I loved our game here (Thursday). It was fun playing on national TV (on ESPN) in a different state."

Arizona, Kansas, Louisville, Maryland, Syracuse, UConn, Seton Hall and Rutgers are among teams that have offered Duval.

"I love his ability to be a playmaker. I like how he creates shots for himself but how good he is at also creating better shots for other players," Biancardi said. "He navigates the pick and roll well. He gets separation offball screens. He just loves to play."

Forsett says Duval has great court vision even under pressure and handles the well under pressure, too.

"You put all that together and you have a special guard and special player. He is a better kid off the court as well. Quiet, humble, just loves to work and try to get better. Him seeing the floor and being able to find people and score, that's a dynamic

guard," Forsett said. "He is explosive around the rim. He knows how to get up and he's aggressive, so that helps."

The coach enjoys what Duval is writing for USA Today.

"He is a sharp kid and takes care of business academically. That is all him (doing the blog). To who much is given, much is required. He handles it well. I trust he will say the right thing. I don't even check. I am reading it just like everybody else when it gets out there," Forsett said.

Duval says he enjoys the writing.

"I do it every so often whenever they need a post or whatever. It is pretty cool," Duval said.

Kentucky's collapse that left coach Mark Stoops' team at 5-7 for the second straight season has many fans wondering how the touted 2016 recruiting class will hold together.

One of the key players in that class is Paintsville linebacker Kash Daniel. He's already been named the Kentucky Gatorade Player of the Year as well as the Paul Hornung Award given to the state's top player by the Louisville Quarterback Club.

He says Kentucky's commits talk a lot about the season that just ended and what lies ahead.

"We are not sugar-coating anything," Daniel said. "We kept up with each other when we were playing. Now that our seasons are over, we talk about when we are taking our official visits and talk about getting to campus and how excited we are to play for Kentucky. We want to show we will do whatever we've got to do to help coach (Mark) Stoops."

The commits also hear the fan noise. Do they view that

as a good thing that shows the passion of UK football fans or a bad thing that fans are questioning the direction of the program?

"It has both sides to it. When you see the fans are frustrated, nobody is going to lie. It was a frustrating season. We all expected Kentucky to go to a bowl. We didn't do it. Nobody was happy with the season and not going to a bowl game, and should not be happy," Daniel, who will play in the U.S. Army All-American Bowl in San Antonio in January, said.

"But there's also another side where you can't take a negative attitude if you want things to get better. If you are negative and all you do is pull the program down. If you bad mouth and say you need a new coach and different players, you are not going to make sense. Some fans just do not know what it is like to do coach Stoops' job or be a college player. For somebody to run their mouth about Kentucky football, they just should not go overboard with it."

When Kara Lawson works a Kentucky basketball game for ESPN, she notices one thing every time.

"I definitely got a lot more reaction on Twitter when I am doing Kentucky games versus any other college basketball games I do," said Lawson. "I get a lot more feedback. Kentucky fans have such a passion for the sport. I started doing Kentucky games a couple years ago and noticed immediately an uptick in my social media for those games."

Lawson scored almost 2,000 points during her four-year career at Tennessee before playing in the Women's National Basketball Association. She won a gold medal



Billy Preston signed an autograph for a fan during the Marshall County Hoop Fest. He says he would love a scholarship offer from Kentucky. He's ranked as one of the top players in the 2017 recruiting class. (Larry Vaught Photo)

at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China.

Kentucky fan Amy Wilton Yates found a way to squeeze through fans waiting for UK coach John Calipari's postgame radio show after a recent game at Rupp Arena to have her picture taken with Lawson.

"She's great, and knows her stuff. I love her," Wilton said.

Another UK fan, Johnny Hayes, agrees with Wilton.

"Prefer her to many of those lousy ex-coaches that work for ESPN," Hayes said.

Lawson understands fans have "subjective views" on what she says about Kentucky.

"I understand you have a right to like or dislike what I say," Lawson said. "I never get all positive reviews but Kentucky fans have been overwhelmingly positive."

If you have a comment, suggestion or criticism, let me know at larryvau@gmail.com or on Twitter at

@vaughtsviews. I've enjoyed hearing from a lot of you the last few weeks.

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>



Favorite Mix

Mix together hulled sunflower chips, safflower seed, peanuts and a little white proso millet. This is a great mix for a tube or tray feeder, or even tossed on the ground. Catbirds, cardinals, doves, wrens, titmice and chickadees will eat every seed. No waste! Everyone is happy!

E-mail: birdingbits@cfjrr.com
© 2015 King Features Syndicate, Inc.

Bob Watkins' Sports In Kentucky

Change. College hoops it isn't about age, it's still about show-me-the-money



Bob Watkins

One-and-done. Approval/disapproval for this plague on college hoops is all about age, the Lexington Herald-Leader opined last week.

No, it isn't.

That young fans are drawn to 'show me the money (now!),' and framed opposite old timers, is no surprise. Most kids don't have any. Fans in the middle with say, less hair, a few too many pounds and jingle in their jeans, are too conveniently ignored.

"Life is short enough already," one said the other day. "I want to see a college kid be a kid, play college ball for his school, his team, the fans, while getting an education. That's who I buy a ticket to watch play not one who's gonna be gone in five months."

Change. Of course college basketball has changed. Once a minor league for professional basketball, today college hoops is a partner alongside the NCAA and CBS. Trend setters Kentucky and more recently Duke are unabashed D-League franchises - big business, big marketing, big television, and big money for a few. In the mix both the aforementioned short-change fans

by scheduling nobodies for games in their home arenas. This is change.

Somewhere amid the clink and clatter of mountains of money, someone - probably an ambulance chasing lawyer - said, "Hey wait a minute! These kids are nothing but plantation hands."

Sonic Boom!

Overall, I believe a fan's age is less relevant than common sense that says one-and-done is greed, an erosion of values and ethics, a charade that enriches ball coaches and those who make them legitimate and media that glorifies all of it.

Good change is not complicated and somehow fans should demand it. To wit:

- High school graduate (and family) has civil rights. Choose free education with frills and benefits or choose a job in the NBA or in its legitimate developmental league.

- High school graduate and family who choose college, time as student-athlete, commits to three years. Money can wait.

- Fans (all ages) buy tickets to watch amateurs play a game they're dedicated to and to the school they represent.

Benefit for fans? College ball coaches stop being wolves in sheep clothing, exploiting teenagers pretending to be dream catchers. Go get professional job!

So, change is inevitable, but can be good change if fans demand it.

GOIN' BOWLIN'

Interesting, the emotional tracks around Kentucky this week.

Bowling Green on out: Joy, celebration for best

team in Kentucky, Top 25 ranking and brag rights. Hilltoppers are 11-2 and C-USA king destined for Christmas week in south Florida. December 21, the Hilltoppers are favored to win the Miami Beach Bowl (ESPN).

Louisville on out: In spite of a sex scandal limbo and so-so 7-5 season, Cardinal Nation occupies a pinnacle of joy also. Governor's Cup ownership fourth year in a row, and a bowl date five days after Christmas two hours down the road, Music City Bowl in Nashville. Texas A&M (8-4) is a good match (ESPN).

Lexington on out: Questions and more questions and grumbling growing louder.

Football. What else can be done to make Kentucky football relevant?

- ✓ The Mitch Barnhart business model to spend more money, isn't working.

- ✓ Schedule. Invite Indiana back onto schedule, and/or Cincinnati and Memphis instead of Austin Peay and New Mexico State (2016 schedule).

- ✓ Once-upon-a-time fan brain storm to: "put a dome over Commonwealth Stadium and stick a basketball floor in the middle," doesn't sound quite so ridiculous anymore.

Basketball ideas

- ✓ For sake of blue collar fan base in Big Blue Nation: new series with Indiana, and schedule one Top 20 opponent in Rupp Arena instead of plundering for profit in New Jersey, Chicago, Miami and Los Angeles.

- ✓ UK officials stop lying about and inflating attendance figures. Did 21,894 fans pay to see Kentucky beat Illinois State Novem-

ber 30 or was the turnstile count of less than 16,000 accurate?

- ✓ Hire Steve Alford before Indiana does.

SCHOOLED!

Kentucky has moved on from an 87-77 loss at UCLA, but the game deserves a special circle on your calendar. December 3, the day the Wildcats were schooled and ideally began to grow up.

- ✓ Clinical. UCLA was well prepared, but more, the Bruins stayed faithful to their plan for all but a handful of seconds.

- ✓ When Kentucky's coach mentioned being out-coached to media, he wasn't being modest or gracious. he was being honest. In an early December game he and his team had been Schooled and went away with a video-to-teach-by.

- ✓ Skal Labissiere was but one of several rookies exposed to: "you ain't ready for hoops at the D-League level let alone The League."

- ✓ And, in a nationally televised show, Steve Alford turned up the heat under Tom Crean's seat at Indiana.

WORTH REPEATING DEPT.

Dedicated to Mark Stoops at Kentucky.

Clemson (13-0) coach Dabo Swinney: "I didn't want to just catch lightning in a bottle. Seven years we've been grinding it, getting better. Every graduate, every recruit, every failure, every success, it all matters when you're trying to get better and be the best. It's been a challenge but it's been fun."

And so it goes.
You can reach me at <bob.watkins24@aol.com>

Estill County Toys For Tots
Applications for the Estill County Toys For Tots program are now being taken. You must apply by Thursday, December 10th. See Chief Ken White at the Ravenna Police Department.