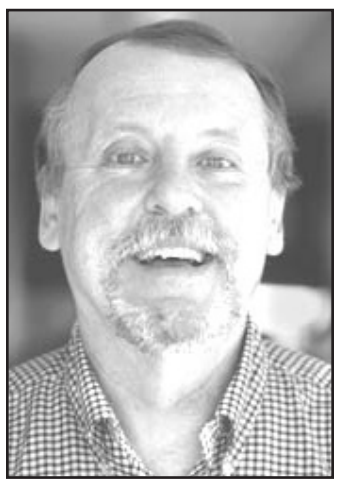


New Offensive Coordinator



Larry Vaught

For the third straight season, Kentucky will have a new offensive coordinator. Once again, even returning starters have to prove they deserve to be on the field.

"Every position on offense has to be wide open," new offensive coordinator Eddie Gran said. "When I started, I told (the players) you're going to start building your resume. I'm looking for accountability and dependability. It doesn't matter to me (who plays).

"I have played freshmen at this level. If your mature enough, your athletic enough and mentality ready to go and can help this team, let's play. That's the message they got and that's why they're excited to come and compete (against the returning players). Our guys know that and are fully aware of that. You've got 15 practices (in the spring) to show me what you can do."

"Right now, it seems like everybody is buying in and I'm excited about it. This offense has proven it can work. They see it on film and see some success."

Kentucky returns Drew Barker, who started the final two games last season at quarterback. Gran and new quarterbacks coach Darin Hinshaw brought in junior college quarterback Stephen Johnson to push Barker. But Gran also says freshman Gunnar Hoak of Ohio, who enrolled at UK in January, will have a chance to become the starter.

"Really coach Hinshaw was the lead dog on Gunnar (when we were coaching at Cincinnati before coming to UK). He had guys we were going after that he evaluated and did that early. Gunnar was one of those guys. He really detailed him. We loved everything about him. The way he threw, the way he competed. Once he committed to Kentucky, we went on," Gran said. "But him already being here was just a bonus for us when we got here."

Gran said it would be foolish for him to think Hoak could not compete for a starting spot.

"I think all of them have to compete. Who says they all can't compete. You just don't know enough about them," Gran said. "Bringing in Stephen creates competition that could make you great or make you not so good. We will find out. Somebody is going to compete and take the job. Who says it could not be Gunnar?"

Kentucky also has two walking quarterbacks, but don't look for Gran to give all the quarterbacks equal reps during spring practice.

"That can't happen. You can't do. You can't have full reps with five different quarterbacks. It sounds good, but it won't happen," Gran said. "There will be some people that will be unhappy just like at running back. There is one ball, one back. Somebody is going to be unhappy When you get your opportunity, you better be productive.

"If you want to move up on that scale, that's how it has to be. It's unfortunate sometimes but we have five (quarterbacks) out throwing four days a week. They are all ready to compete, but there's no way to give them all equal reps. Can't happen."

Play Taking A Toll

Kentucky's play is taking a toll on coach John Calipari this season.

"I know they want to win

and I know they want to play well. They're a great group of kids, but I've got to keep teaching them. It's very tiring. You notice I'm back to exercising because I'm trying to make sure you don't find me under the desk in a week," Calipari said.

That was a day before his team dominated Florida 80-61 and three days after his team blew a 21-point lead and lost at Tennessee. That was the biggest lead any UK team had ever blown to lose a game.

No wonder Calipari admitted every day has been a "new challenge" for him this year.

"I'm getting on my staff to be enthusiastic, to add some energy, and then telling them to stop because I want the team to have the energy, not the staff. It's got to be them. It's a process. All we're trying to do is, 'How do we get better?' I can't tell you," the coach said.

Hopefully he can figure it out soon because UK has four road games — South Carolina, Texas A&M, Vanderbilt and Florida — remaining that will determine it's NCAA seeding — or even NCAA eligibility.

Shannon Spake

Any Kentucky basketball fan has to know who ESPN sideline analyst Shannon Spake is.

Last March she practically became a part of the UK program she spent so much time following the unbeaten Wildcats. She is a sideline reporter for Saturday primetime college basketball and Super Tuesday SEC basketball games. She is a sideline reporter for Saturday college football games.

She's also an avid runner and even though she's on the road most of the week still finds a way to train — and run long-distance events regularly. Last week she worked the Kentucky at Tennessee game. She also brought one of her twin sons, Brady, with her to the game. She takes each boy on one road trip each season and this was Brady's treat.

During UK's shootaround, someone took a picture of her talking to UK guard Tyler Ulis as her son looked on. "One day I'll explain to my kids how far 'playing with heart' can take you and use this guy as an example," Spake posted on Twitter along with the picture.

I always enjoy talking to her and had a chance to visit a few minutes before the game. She was a bit worried about her pregame preparation because Chet's iPad had broke and he had used her laptop during the day.

"I feel so nervous because I am not prepared like I usually am," Spake, who also covered NASCAR at one time, said.

About an hour before game time, she got ready to say goodbye to her son and gave him his pregame instructions about where she would be, what he could, what he could eat, etc. Then she smiled at him and gave him a kiss. The grandfather in me could not resist taking a picture of that touching moment that I posted on Twitter and tagged Spake.

Here is the response I got from her: "I so appreciate it! My favorite moment EVER! And thank you for your kind words and support," Spake said.

There's no ESPN analyst I respect more than Spake. Her work is always terrific and she does it in a charming way. She has to conduct halftime interviews with coaches who are not always eager to talk. She has to give in-game updates. But coaches and players all like and respect her and from my perspective fans do as well — and should.

Kentucky Women

Kentucky women's coach Matthew Mitchell cannot say enough good things about how freshman Maci Morris of Bell County is playing. He's most proud, though, of the way she was willing to improve her de-

fense so she could be an even bigger contributor this season.

"Any time a freshman is able to come in and have success defensively, we are thrilled because it is very, very different on so many levels. First of all, physically almost all of our players were superior to anybody they were playing against in high school," Mitchell said.

"There are things you can get away with physically that you can't in college and it is hard to get that through their head. Then you are talking about the mental challenge you have of explaining how to do things the right way. Maci is not anywhere close to her physical peak. She is still maturing as a basketball player. Physically, she is going to get stronger and quicker. It is a real testament to the power of her mind that she is where she is."

Mitchell remembers early in the season when she was playing what he called terrible defense.

"As a coaching staff we explained to her that we don't have a real deep team and there is no good scenario for us if she is a weak defender," Mitchell said. "We worked hard on her positioning and she worked real hard on her effort and it has been amazing to watch her progress so quickly.

"It was through just a commitment mentally to be the best she can be right now and I think she will just keep getting better. But it has been really exciting to watch."

Billy Preston

Standout junior Billy Preston of Advanced Prep International in Texas was wearing a Kentucky basketball hoodie after playing in the Thoroughbred Classic in Somerset Sunday. He had taken an unofficial visit to UK along with teammate Trevon Duval, one of the nation's top junior point guards, on Saturday to watch Kentucky practice before the Cats played Florida later that day.

He cautioned not to read

too much into him having on a Kentucky hoodie.

"I usually try to buy something to wear from the schools I go to visit," said the 6-9 power forward after spending time signing autographs after his team's loss to Hillcrest Academy.

Preston and Duval do not have scholarship offers from Kentucky yet even though both are consensus top 10 players in the 2017 recruiting class. Preston, who had 22 points in a win over Thon Maker's Athlete Institute of Canada Saturday, said Calipari really did not discuss when or if UK would offer during his visit.

"Anybody is going to wait for an offer from Kentucky," Preston said. "I have 13 offers now and I am going to narrow that down to six in the next few months."

What if Kentucky does not offer until sometime in the summer? After all he already has offers from Kansas, Maryland, Arizona, Connecticut and others.

"Nobody is going to cut down a list without having a spot for Kentucky. If they offer, they are on the list no matter when it is," Preston said.

Calipari and his staff did not make an appearance in Somerset Sunday. That was somewhat surprising since not only were Preston and Duval playing, but so were 7-0 Deandre Ayton and 6-9 Jarred Vanderbilt. Ayton is ranked as the top player in the 2017 recruiting class by most and Vanderbilt is a top 10 player. Both have Kentucky offers.

Alabama coach Avery Johnson and staff members were there Sunday.

The Firecrackers

If you have never seen the Firecrackers, a jump rope team from Ohio, perform their halftime routine, it's your loss. They were back at Rupp Arena last week for the UK-Florida game and got a standing ovation from the Rupp Arena faithful. They always draw an ova-

tion, but it was even bigger this year.

The Firecrackers love coming to Rupp Arena for several reasons.

— It's the biggest crowd they perform in front of each year.

— UK gives each girl a goodie bag that was filled with candy and a Kentucky bracelet. No other school does that.

— Kentucky allows the girls' parents to buy tickets so they can watch the performance. The only school that does not — Kentucky fans will believe this — is Indiana.

— Kentucky sends a bus to pick up the girls and then take them home.

It was also fun watching the girls try to teach Kentucky Sports Radio's Ryan Lemond the "rump jump" before the game. He planned to do the

"rump jump" when he promoted their halftime appearance at the 4-minute timeout in the first half, but he actually hurt his back practicing with the girls.

The Firecrackers are so good, it makes you forget how young they are. Then Chuck Page sent me a photo of their ride home where the girls all tie their hair up like boneheads using empty water bottles underneath the hair.

"It's a tradition on the way home that they all really like," Page said.

Thanks Again

Thanks for reading and remember you can reach me at larryvau@gmail.com or @vaughtsviews on Twitter. You can also read more of my work at www.vaughtsviews.com



The Firecrackers put on another dazzling halftime show at Rupp Arena and got their biggest ovation ever at Rupp Arena. (Vicky Graff Photo)

Bob Watkins' Sports In Kentucky

Curve ballin' Pitino pitches 'the system is broken,' is certain it ain't us



Bob Watkins

Imagine, a dollar for every occasion Rick Pitino has gone big-eyed and resorted to hyperbole. For instance, "I have never seen anything like this in my life!" or "this is the greatest injustice I've ever seen."

Da Coach is 63 and still seeing new stuff. Impressive.

Reaching for my own hyperbole, it is Pitino's mastery of the curve ball that fascinates, separates him from competition. To throw one, "imparts forward spin (and) essentially translates to introducing a *significant deviation* to a preceding concept," Wikipedia says.

Pitino's deviations last week were Hall of Fame-worthy.

• First, a straight fast ball — "The NCAA system is broken," he said. Period.

• Next, a circle-change. Using fan sympathy for Damian Lee and Trey Lewis "and this team being punished" with no NCAA Tournament, sets off our *this-ain't-fair* meters.

• Then, Pitino changed speeds (and subject) away from root-cause — shenanigans gone on at Billy Minardi Hall.

The high curve (hyperbole). Pander to bosses James Ramsey ("doesn't deserve the heat,") and Tom Jurich, ("is the best director of athletics in all of college sports.")

UofL's post-season ban is Jurich's idea.

So, fastball, circle change and curves, all quality pitches, uh, deviations.

But best ways to success don't change — location, location, location. From his castle, UofL's six million-a-year ball coach could not see Minardi Hall and so handed keys to an ambitious kid who had a novel pitch-or-two of his own to try.

√ Today, UofL's demise is not the NCAA's fault. If, its system is broken as Pitino says, then he should read more. Maybe Walt Kelly who wrote, "we have met the enemy and he is us!"

√ The real broken part of the NCAA is a system that lets universities make ball coaches filthy rich and players look into forming a union. Formula for corruption.

√ This isn't Jurich's fault either. He's much too busy being best AD in America to visit a dorm. C'mon.

√ Villains? Clearly, McGee and Katina Powell.

√ Responsibility for Louisville's problem, including loss of millions from NCAA Tournament pay-out, belongs to the man who handed over the dorm keys and his boss.

Pitino got too big, too rich, too important and much too famous to be bothered with a stop-by at a college dormitory now-and-then, unannounced.

This was as preventable as that. Like many gone be-

fore him, Pitino has lost the meaning.

Pitino is right about this part: "Louisville should be penalized, not these kids."

He should forfeit a year's pay, Tom Jurich should do likewise. Cardinal faithful by way of a poll could decide allocation of monies to Louisville charities.

SUPER STAR? BALONEY

Whitney Creech is quite a points-producer for Jenkins High School's basketball team. Averaging 50 points a game is noteworthy, even praise-worthy. But super star?

To put super star in front of a teenager's name is unfair to Creech and insulting to her teammates. Editors at the Lexington and Louisville newspapers ought to better monitor the gush factor of its sports writers.

Creech averages 50 points on a team that had an 11-12 record last time I looked. She takes more than 60 per cent of her team's shots.

In splashy articles about Creech from both metro newspapers, names of teammates who set screens, defend, pass, breathe the same air, and shoot once in awhile, were missing.

REGRESSION AT KENTUCKY?

Veterans Alex Poythress and Marcus Lee have not improved in three years. An argument can be made both have regressed. Maybe John Calipari's coaching effectiveness has a ceiling, one and done.

Kentucky frittered away a 21 point lead and lost at Tennessee. Poor play inside was blamed. Arriving at

post game to explain to fans what happened, Calipari instructed the media "let's make this quick." Another free pass?

Four days later Tennessee (11-12) lost by 18 to Arkansas. In Lexington, Isaac Humphries, who played zero minutes in Knoxville, played 15 minutes against Florida. Who took the bows? Calipari.

READERS (RIGHT) WRITE

About UK basketball and John Calipari.

"... perhaps you did not think through everything you wrote and the damage it might do to fans, parents, and all the players (who) I hope did not read your article. The pressure that players face is unreal. I am 82 years old and a long-time (UK) fan and have seen a lot. I felt some of your commentary was unwarranted."

WORTH REPEATING DEPT.

Louisville's self-imposed no-NCAA-Tournament-this-year news prompted ESPN's Tony Kornheiser to warn viewers of Pardon The Interruption, "this is a cheap shot alert."

Kornheiser proposes "an alternate Final Four that includes scandal-ridden programs with Hall of Fame coaches. Louisville, SMU, Syracuse and Kentucky, because we know at some point they're going to be accused of something."

COMMENT: A more intriguing (deserving?) candidate for this Final Four: North Carolina.

And so it goes.

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