

ESPN Reporter Feels Like a Part of "Big Blue Nation"



Larry Vaught

During the last few years, Kentucky basketball fans have got to know ESPN reporter Shannon Spake very well and have embraced her to the point that they sometimes feel like she is part of the Big Blue Nation.

How does Spake feel about that?

"I love that. There is something unique about Kentucky fans," said Spake. "Their passion, there is nothing like it. I understood that a little bit more this last season. Two years ago I was part of that incredible run (38-0 start). I was with the guys during the entire (NCAA) tourney. I saw how fans turned out for practices and games.

"This year Kentucky was not in the tournament long and you would see empty seats at venues. That's when you realize the impact of Big Blue Nation."

When she covers a game at Rupp Arena, her press row seat normally is directly in front of the E-Ruption Zone where the UK students are.

"I love sitting there. Those kids are awesome and they are so great when I bring my kids with me to a game," Spake said. "I love being accepted by Big Blue Nation and being part of it myself."

Spake's personality and professionalism often open doors for special story ideas. One came when she watched the Cats work out during their early morning Breakfast Club last season. Originally I thought she was going to make players like Jamal Murray, Tyler Ulis and Isaiah Briscoe go through the type of workouts she does that got her ready for a 70.3-mile Ironman in Raleigh, N.C., last Sunday, that she finished in 6 hours, 43 minutes.

"I didn't want an old lady to show up 19-year-old guys," Spake laughed and said. "Seriously, I just happened to be in town for a piece I was doing with Isaac Humphries playing the piano and singing and that was such a powerful moment being in the room with him.

"I asked if I could be part of the Breakfast Club and they agreed. When you have a situation like Kentucky with so many new players and new dynamics ever season, every bit of time spent together without coaches has got to help with team chemistry."

Spake says she "loves the best story" at games even if the underdog wins. However, she admits she was hoping Kentucky would complete a 40-0 season and win the national title in 2015 when it lost to Wisconsin.

"I was along for that great ride. I was totally invested and thought it would be a really cool story to see Kentucky win the championship," she said. "I think I saw my kids three days that whole month of March."

She had a special moment last season when UK played at Tennessee. She said UK Athletics photographer Chet White always "is so great" taking pictures

of her twin sons when she has one of them with her at games.

"I don't bring them when I do football, but when I do basketball games, the schools have been great. They find me babysitters and get tickets to the games," she said. "During pregame I was talking to Tyler (Ulis) and my son just walked up with a ball. Chet got a great photo and I told my son one day I hope he grows up with the fight and tenacity that Tyler Ulis has.

"The previous season Willie (Cauley-Stein) was talking to my other son and Chet got a photo. Willie adored kids. He always was asking me about my kids. I went to a Charlotte Hornets game (this season) and saw Aaron Harrison (play) and felt like a proud momma."

UK Still #1

Kentucky fans were disappointed when five-star center Marques Bolden picked Duke over Kentucky recently even though some recruiting services still have UK with the No. 1 recruiting class.

Sporting News columnist Mike DeCourcy doesn't think losing Bolden was a devastating blow for Kentucky.

"Although I like Bolden a lot and think he is a useful player, I never thought it was urgent for Kentucky to get him. He would have made the Wildcats a better team, as he will make Duke better," DeCourcy said. "But UK has a lot of frontcourt players. If they don't excel next season, it won't be for lack of size or depth."

Slow Football Sales

Kentucky football season ticket sales are lagging behind last year -- and who can be surprised by that after four straight losing seasons.

So what player or players has to make a big jump in August for UK to be successful next season? That's a question I posed to four media members who cover Kentucky football and basketball.

Tom Leach, UK Radio Network/Leach Report: "We've seen players make transformations over the summer in the past and this would be a great time for Matt Elam to take it to another level in preparing himself to be a force in the middle of the defensive line come August. And other interior defensive linemen making that big jump would also be a big plus because the Cats."

Mark Story, Lexington Herald-Leader: "The entire middle of the defensive front, and I'm sure people will focus especially on Matt Elam because of his recruiting profile."

Keith Taylor, Kentucky Forward: "Boom Williams and the receivers, namely Garrett Johnson and Jeff Badet will need to build on the spring they each had in order for the Wildcats to establish a legitimate passing game. Didn't see as many dropped passes during spring workouts, also a bonus for the new offensive coaching staff."

Freddie Maggard, Kentucky Sports Radio: "Offensive tackle and the defensive line in entirety. If those two improve or develop, Kentucky has the surrounding skill talent to win some games."

Golf Finishes 13th

Probably not near enough attention was paid to what the Kentucky men's golf team did when it finished 13th in the NCAA championships after failing to even



Shannon Spake likes the passion of Kentucky basketball fans and appreciates the way fans, coaches and players at Kentucky treat her while she's doing her job. (Vicky Graff Photo)

make the tourney field last year. It was Kentucky's best finish since 2006 when the Cats were sixth.

Coach Brian Craig got UK into the NCAA for the sixth time in his tenure and not only did the Cats play well, but they did it with only one senior and four of the five NCAA players were Kentuckians.

Sophomores Chip McDaniel of Manchester and Cooper Musselman of Louisville tied for 26th in the individual race. Senior David Snyder of Somerset and sophomore Stephen Stallings of Louisville tied for 66th and freshman Lukas Euler of Germany 79th.

It was quite a year for the Cats. Stallings had a nine-hole score of 29 during a 7-under par round of 65. He was the first UK player to shoot a 65 in two years when Snyder did the same things at the SEC Championships. Stallings was only the 11th UK player since 2005 to shoot 65 or better in a round.

The team won its first tournament title in several years and McDaniel had a terrific individual season.

Stallings' mother, Pam, is understandably proud of what the team did at the NCAA Championship in Oregon.

"Everyone in Oregon was simply spectacular and watching Golf Channel realizing how well our boys have done -- the UK Nation should be so proud and coach Craig and the boys deserve all the attention and support," Pam Stallings said.

The team probably deserved more attention because the 13th-place finish was higher than the more high profile UK teams had this year.

The Seven-Footer

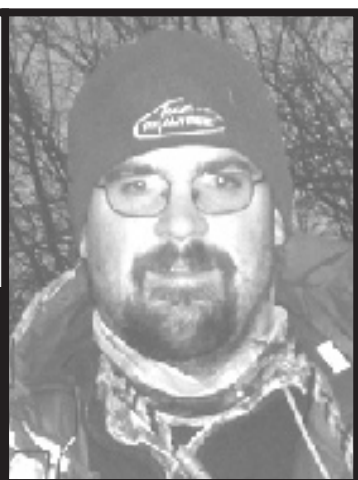
Seven-footer DeAndre Ayton of Hillcrest Academy in Phoenix is one of the top players in the 2017 recruiting class but Ken-



DeAndre Ayton says the attention that comes with being one of the top players in the 2017 recruiting class will not distract him. (Larry Vaught/Verizon Photo)

Wanderings from the Woods & Water by Jay Bicknell

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Gorilla and a Fighter

My goal is to follow God's lead. As of lately God has given me things to write about other than the outdoors. So bear with me if I don't write about hunting or fishing. Just have to follow God's lead!

So a Gorilla gets shot for being a danger to people. Then it becomes crazy news! It's on every channel. PETA comes out against the killing of a Gorilla. A stupid Gorilla distracts all of America on what's really going on.

Something that really bothers me about this Gorilla shooting! The people who come out against killing a Gorilla are the same people who support killing babies (abortion). I just don't get how it's ok to murder a baby and awful to kill a Gorilla. I wonder how much trouble I would get in if I started killing kittens and puppies because I didn't want them or don't like them. I would probably get hung!

So, a fighter, a great fighter died. Muhammad Ali dies and he is held up as a hero. It's on every channel that he passed away. An old boxer dies and all of America is distracted on what's really going on.

Something that really bothers me about a boxer dying. If not mistaken I think Ali was sentenced to several years in prison for draft dodging. The real heroes are the black men who went into battle for their country. Those guys answered the call in time of strong rac-

ism. Sorry, I don't think Ali was a hero. The 7300 black men who fought and died in Vietnam are the heroes I respect!

All it takes is minor stuff and the entire United States is distracted. We are distracted from the real issues. We are distracted from what is drowning America. If we don't get our eyes on the real issues, then America is lost.

You know Jesus asked Peter to come to him. Peter got out the boat and walked on water. He was doing good until he was distracted by the waves. A wave is all it took and he sank like a rock! America took it eyes off Jesus a long time ago and we just keep sinking. America might be distracted, but you don't have to be. Just turn your eyes towards Jesus. I truly believe the end is coming fast and it's time to get right or get left!

Until next week, get out and enjoy God's creation!



Calling All Buntings

Sure enough, after I wrote about millet being a favorite for buntings, I spotted a male painted bunting one morning in my little bird ground feeding area. He came the next day, too. Male painteds are spectacular! All you need is white proso millet. So simple.

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Kentucky Native Rick Stansbury New WKU Coach

by LARRY VAUGHT

Kentucky native Rick Stansbury says he won't be about rebuilding at Western Kentucky. Instead, Western's new head basketball coach wants players that can help the Hilltoppers win immediately just like players at Kentucky and Louisville are expected to do.

Stansbury was an assistant coach and then head coach at Mississippi State. His most recent job before coming to Western was as assistant coach at Texas A&M.

"I want the same type players I had at Mississippi State and Texas A&M here. At the end of the year, we all play in the same tournament," Stansbury said. "I didn't have McDonald's All-Americans at Mississippi State and won. I want SEC players. I want guys who believe they can be pros and compete against teams like Kentucky and Louisville.

"I want the same play-

ers Kentucky and Louisville wants. I have got to hope they look at a kid and maybe hold off to get a McDonald's All-American and then that kid makes a commitment to me and turns out to be as good as that McDonald's kid. Those kids exist, too. There are always kids in this state who become terrific players in college. Kids don't have to leave this state for Wichita, Butler, Xavier or VCU. Western Kentucky has more tradition than all those programs and I see no reason we can't be really successful here."

Those in-state players could include some UK might target next year like John Calipari did three years ago with Derek Willis and Dominique Hawkins. The Cats could lose anywhere from five to nine players off next year's team and even with Calipari's recruiting prowess, he could easily target several in-state players in the 2017 class.

top ten
BEST STATES TO RETIRE

1. Florida
2. Wyoming
3. South Dakota
4. South Carolina
5. Colorado
6. Idaho
7. Texas
8. Montana
9. Nevada
10. Virginia

Source: WalletHub, 2016