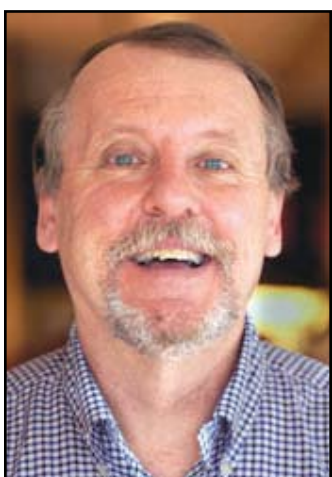


Softball & baseball becoming more popular



by Larry Vaught

Kentucky's Softball/Baseball Fan Day turned out to be a huge success and shows the growing popularity of both sports at Kentucky.

Softball coach Rachel Lawson thought it was a bit ambitious to hold spots for 200 youngsters for a clinic during the first preseason fan day the two programs have hosted. However, the spots were filled way early. Another 650 indicated online they would attend and an hour before the event started fans of all ages were lined up to meet the players and coaches.

First-year baseball coach Nick Mingione wants to find a way to do more fan-friendly events before UK gets set to move into a new baseball stadium next year. "If you want people at the games, you have to find ways to engage with them," he said.

Senior pitcher Meagan Prince was glad to have an opportunity to meet the fans because she knows what they have meant to the softball program.

"It can make you win a game. It is a game changer. If we have the fans in the stadium and it is a packed house, when you walk out and have all that support you are like, 'I don't care who I am facing. Nobody is going to beat me today,'" Prince said.

"If you feel like you are struggling and you look up and all these people came to watch Kentucky softball and to watch me, that gives you extra confidence to be like, 'You know what. I can do this and I am here for a reason.' These fans mean a lot to our team."

Signee Washington

Kentucky signee P.J. Washington will be in western Kentucky to play games Feb. 17-18 as part of The Grind Session at Marshall County High School.

Findlay Prep (Henderson, Nev.) was not original-

ly scheduled to play in Kentucky this year. However, when the offer to play two games in Kentucky came, Findlay Prep coach Paul Washington knew it was too good an opportunity to decline.

"It's pretty rare for a school like Findlay Prep to add games during the season. The should tell you how important Kentucky and BBN is to us. It would not have happened in any other state," Paul Washington, the UK signee's father, said. "It would have been easy to say no, but this is going to be a good event and we are looking forward to it. I hope a lot of Kentucky fans get to see P.J. and he plays well and the team plays well."

Findlay played in a tournament in Phoenix that Dan Hudson helped organize as part of The Grind Session. The Findlay coach was impressed both by the tournament and Hudson. Hudson gave Paul Washington possible dates to play and when two games were in Kentucky, the coach was convinced.

"It will give BBN a sneak peak of what is going on," Paul Washington said. "We are really looking forward to it."

The 6-8, 230-pound Kentucky signee is a consensus top 20 player nationally and is considered the best power forward in the 2017 recruiting class by Scout.com. P.J. Washington played on the 2016 USA team that won a gold medal at the FIBA Americas Under 18 Championship. He started all five games and averaged 10 points and 4 rebounds per game. Recently he was named a McDonald's All-American.

Through 21 games, P.J. Washington is averaging 18.5 points, 9.3 rebounds, 5.4 assists, 2.0 blocks and 2.0 steals per game. He's hitting 53 percent overall from the field and 33 percent from 3-point range.

The coach said his son welcomes chances to play in big events like the one in Kentucky that will be in front of UK fans. He noted that as a sixth-grade player, he played AAU with players two years older.

"He's been overseas to play and played the highest level of AAU," Paul Washington said. "He's played with and against great players."

That includes Duke signee Gary Trent Jr., who has played in two events in Kentucky this season

already. He once played against Washington in an AAU fifth-grade national championship and has been a teammate on Team USA.

"Kentucky fans are going to embrace him with open arms and nothing but love," Trent Jr. said. "Kentucky's fan base is crazy. They love the Wildcats. I hope nothing but the best for him and hope he comes to Kentucky and has 100 points and 100 rebounds and puts on a great show to show what he is bringing to Kentucky next year. Everything he is bringing is exceptional. I am happy for him and UK fans are going to love him."

Washington's father said his son has been doing things this season to help him when he gets to Kentucky.

"He's allowing the game to come to him. He's really getting focused on each quarter, really looking at film to see what other teams do," Paul Washington said. "He is taking on that alpha dog mentality that Cal wants."

More Vitale

Count ESPN analyst Dick Vitale as one who believes a national championship contender has to be a solid defensive team. That's why he says Louisville could be "dangerous" at tournament time.

"When you defend, you have a chance to win. That is my concern with Kentucky and North Carolina. Both have to be much more consistent defensively because you can't rely on scoring 95 points every game. Perfect example was (Kentucky's loss to) UCLA. Defend and that doesn't happen," Vitale said.

At times it's almost like Kentucky relies on scoring faster and more often than an opponent without focus on defense. Vitale, a former college and NBA coach, understands why players have that philosophy.

"You have got to do both like they did when they had the national title team (in 2012) with Anthony Davis and those kids. They scored and defended," Vitale said. "It's tough because John always has such a young group that dominated so easy in high school and now you try to blend them to play defense."

"I think you will see a different team come February. I think John is a master at getting kids to buy in. What he has done here I don't think people nationally give enough credit. To take kids out of high school and have them come in and not worry about stats and minutes is mind boggling. They come here knowing we will win our share of games and I am going to go on to the NBA and he sells that in a very positive way, and it works for him."

Another ESPN analyst, Seth Greenberg, thinks rule changes in college basketball now favor the offense and could help an "offensive team" like UK win a championship.

"But there are flaws in Kentucky's defense now," Greenberg said.

He cited UK's win last week at Mississippi State when the Cats had trouble defending the ball screen, a problem that has cropped up often this season.

"They've got to get better at it, but you know, he's starting four freshmen, and John knows what they have to get better at because as opposed to UCLA and maybe even North Carolina, although they can score Kentucky, they don't have as many shot makers as UCLA and North Carolina," Greenberg said. "So if you don't



Kentucky's first Baseball/Softball Fan Day was a big success with about 1,000 fans attending. (Larry Vaught Photo)

have as many shot makers you surely need to probably tighten up that ball screen out of the lane a little better."

Vitale's current pick to win the title: North Carolina. Greenberg's pick today to win the title: UCLA.

Makayla Epps

Kentucky senior Makayla Epps has been in the media spotlight not only at Kentucky but during her career at Marion County High School — or earlier.

She's done so many interviews that I recently asked her if there was a question she wished someone would ask her that has not been asked.

"Yes. Sort of like how is my day going. The easy stuff. I have gone through a lot of interviews and saw one on Twitter when I was 12 and don't even remember it at all," said Epps. "I have been doing this eight or nine years. I think doing interviews is cool and fun and gives you something to talk about. All interview questions to me are good questions, but I like the fun questions the most."

What about her getting a chance to interview media members?

"I feel like that would be fun and I could come up with some good questions. Some reporters and media try to get a little deeper and get the dirt and grit behind the scenes," she said. "Just to switch the role on them and see how much they would like it would be a lot of fun."

She's also having a lot of fun after UK rebounded from a skid to win four straight games.

Embarrassing

Sometimes John Calipari admits that his daughters are not thrilled when he takes advice from others and uses phrases like "YOLO" or others on Twitter — even when he admits he does not know what the phrase really means. In fact, his daughters tell him it is embarrassing.

"My daughter (Erin) was in an article in the New York Post for some of her research. I am pretty proud of her. Megan is getting married this June and told her fiancé you are going to be going into the family now and he is going to be embarrassing you like he embarrasses us," Calipari said.

"Look, life is too short. I like to have fun with what I am doing. Whether it is the podcast or you know — I do not take myself that serious. I know who I am. I know where I came from. I don't try to, 'I am the best ever.'"

No, that's not what I think of myself. I do what I do and try to do it for the kids.

"You (media members) all will judge how I am. Twenty years from now they will try to tell me what kind of job I did. Great. Right now I see myself getting older and I really just want to have fun with what I am doing. Guy grabbed me and said, 'I am getting old. I really want to shake your hand.' I said, 'I am getting old, too. We are both getting old.'"

Quote of the Week

Quote of the Week: Malik Monk is glad he has Bam Adebayo on his team. "Every team is scared of him when they see him I think. Especially when he comes out to defend guards on the perimeter. Bam is a great player and I'm glad to have him on this team. He brings a lot of energy too so we feed off of that, too," Monk said.



Makayla Epps has been interviewed for years, but thinks it would be fun to have a chance for her to ask media members questions. (Vicky Graff Photo)



Kentucky signee P.J. Washington and his father, Findlay Prep coach Paul Washington, will be in Marshall County for games Feb. 17 and 18.