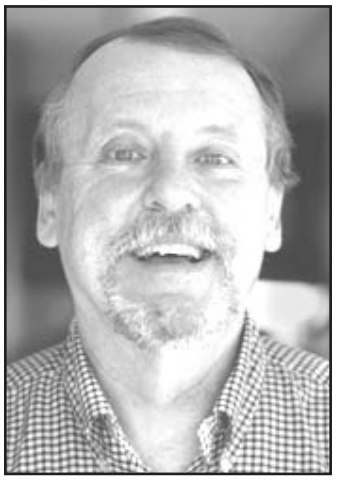


UK's Recruiting Woes Are Ones Most Schools Would Love To Have



by Larry Vaught

Now that Zion Williamson is definitely not coming to Kentucky, maybe it's time to focus more on the three players that UK coach John Calipari has already signed in his 2018 recruiting class.

Not only did UK not get Williamson, he went to Duke to give the Blue Devils the top three players in the 2018 recruiting class. However, FoxSports/247Sports recruiting analyst Evan Daniels says Kentucky fans are going to like Tyler Herro, Keldon Johnson and Immanuel Quickley. ESPN college basketball analyst Dick Vitale already does.

"I know about 350 other schools that would like to be having the so-called recruiting problems that Kentucky is," said Vitale.

Johnson is the highest ranked of the three players and, like Quickley, is a McDonald's All-American.

"Keldon really plays hard," Daniels said. "He's a driving, slashing guard who can get to the rim and finish or dish. He's a good athlete and a really tough kid. I think he really has a bright future."

Johnson is ranked as the No. 6 player in the class in the latest ESPN rankings and was named to the Naismith Trophy Midseason Team.

Quickley is the point guard Calipari targeted in this recruiting class from the start and he played on the USA under 18 team that Calipari coached last summer. If both Quade Green and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander return to UK next season as most expect, Daniels said Quickley would have no problem playing with either one. He's dropped from 12th to 17th in the rankings after missing the first month of the season with mononucleosis.

"Quickley is going to be good. He has great court vision, can run and can distribute the ball," Daniels said. "He's 6-3 with long arms. He really competes hard on

both ends of the floor. He's made strides with his jump shot, and he can shoot with distance better now. I really like his approach to the game and his mental ability."

Herro is the best shooter of the trio of guards, but Daniels says he's a scorer and not just a shooter. He also jumped into the No. 25 spot in the latest ESPN rankings.

"He is pushing 6-5. He's an above average athlete who can really score off the bounce, hit from midrange. He can make runners, floaters. He knows they need a shooter and he can make a shot from both 3-point range and the midlevel area," Daniels said.

"He has a lot of swagger and athletic ability. He is a fine defender. He'll have to get better defensively like any high school senior, but he has the ability to defend his position. I don't see that being a problem for him."

What about Kentucky? How big a problem is it for Kentucky that Williamson picked Duke, not UK? Where will UK turn for an inside presence in its 2018 recruiting class?

"Truth is there is not a lot of talent at the big man spot still out there in the 2018 class," Daniels said. "I am not sure what direction they might take. Maybe they will wait for the grad transfer market. Somebody will pop up for Kentucky. Somebody always does."

"There's also no certainty at Kentucky this year on who will or who will not be back next year. There's nothing certain yet on who may or may not leave for the draft, so that's a little different for UK, too."

Calipari has not signed a top five recruit in the last three years, something that led many UK fans to speculate about what has happened to the once dominant recruiting hauls Calipari had.

"We don't get every kid. I've said that all along. We get the ones that need to come here. Others chose not to and that's fine. That's their choice," Calipari said. "Obviously, the kids who have come here are worth over a billion dollars. Seventeen have graduated. Thirty-five, or whatever, got drafted. Three No. 1 (overall NBA draft picks). I mean, kids who have come here belonged here. It doesn't mean that everybody needs to come here. I don't think it's changed much at all."

Kentucky last week of-

fered 6-10 E.J. Montgomery, the No. 1 player in Georgia and top 15 player nationally, a scholarship. Duke, North Carolina, Clemson and UCLA are among other schools that have offered and he's already indicated he will visit Duke. He is a McDonald's All-American. He originally committed to Auburn before changing his mind after the FBI probe into college basketball started.

Kentucky has also shown some interest in shooting guard Anfernee Simons, a one-time Louisville commit who is the highest ranked uncommitted player in the 2018 Class at No. 7. Tennessee and Florida are viewed as his leaders.

Another possibility is point guard John Lecque, the No. 9 player in the 2019 recruiting class who has indicated his might consider reclassifying to the 2018 class. Don't forget 6-9 James Wiseman of Memphis, the top player in the 2019 recruiting class. He has a UK offer and many still believe he will reclassify to the 2018 class even though he continues to insist he will not.

Outlook Changes

At halftime of Kentucky's game at West Virginia, social media was predicting a likely NIT season for Kentucky. After UK overcame a 17-point, second-half deficit to win, the outlook totally changed.

"I don't care how young you are, if you can win in Morgantown you can get to the Final Four. Huge win for Kentucky," ESPN analyst Jimmy Dykes, a former UK assistant coach, posted on Twitter.

Another ESPN analyst, Dick Vitale, said before the game "never ever" count on Calipari.

"He has talent/not the super talent of the past but certainly good enough to win/You saw it today baby," Vitale posted on Twitter after UK's win.

Flip to Kentucky

Jacksonville offensive lineman Nick Lewis flipped his commitment from Washington State to Kentucky and was expected to sign with the Wildcats this week. He's a 6-10, 350-pound tackle who is a three-star prospect.

He's a former Bolles School teammate of Alabama quarterback Mac Jones, a one-time Kentucky commit before he flipped to Alabama.



Junior guard Taylor Murray needed a midseason attitude adjustment and has now elevated her play. (Vicky Graff Photo)

Jones was the one who first encouraged him to come to Kentucky.

"When I first got the Kentucky offer, Mac told me that Kentucky was the spot for me. Not Alabama, but Kentucky and he is at Alabama," Lewis said. "He told me I would love Kentucky. I just thought it was funny for a guy at Alabama to tell me to go somewhere else."

Here's another oddity about Lewis — he is a Duke basketball fan because Duke star Grayson Allen is also from Jacksonville and Lewis trained with Allen and played some pickup basketball with him.

"Kentucky always has one of the best basketball teams in the country. I know that," Lewis said. "But I was a Duke fan. I do love Duke because I played with Grayson Allen and we are friends. He's my man. I got to be for him."

Switch to Fl. State

The flip side of the flip came with Ohio linebacker Xavier Peters, the highest rated commitment in UK's 2018 class, when he switched to Florida State over the weekend.

When he didn't sign with UK in December like other players who had verbally committed, it indicated he might no longer be all-in with UK. He announced he would visit Florida and Miami, but then flipped to Florida State.

More than 1 gift

Senior catcher Troy Squires is as good as anyone in the Southeastern Conference at throwing out runners trying to steal bases. That's one reason he was an all-SEC player last season.

However, he's got a gift for two other things — sacrifice bunts and getting hit by pitches.

"I don't like to toot my own horn but I take pride in the short game," Squires, an all-state player at Central Hardin High School, said. "I take pride in bunts. It started back in high school. I batted second because if guy got on I was getting him over (to second base) with the hit and run or bunt. At an early age my dad really taught me how to control the bat. I just added that to my arsenal."

The catcher ranked 19th nationally in sacrifice bunts last year with 13. That's tied

for fourth on the UK single-season list and he is tied for ninth on UK list for career sacrifices with 21.

He also got hit by a pitch 10 times last year, the second highest total on the team.

"If they are going to give me a free base and throw inside, I am going to take it. That's part of our offense and our identity," Squires said. "We are not going to move. If they want to give us a free base, we'll take it. It's just part of my game. I take pride in that as well."

Kentucky goes into the season ranked No. 8, its highest preseason ranking ever.

Challenged team

Kentucky cheerleading coach Jomo Thompson challenged his team when practiced started.

"This was a year that lot of people said we were not supposed to win (the national championship) and I even told team at the beginning of the year we were not as good in some areas as we needed to be," Thompson said.

If that was true, it changed because Kentucky executed a near flawless performance in its final routine at the nationals in Orlando last month to win its third straight national title — and 23rd overall. Thompson said UK did that even though four team members had the flu and the team also had a stunt mishap in the semifinals.

"I do not worry about hitting a perfect routine in the semifinals because that can make their heads too big. That kind of humbled us," Thompson said. "We were still head and shoulders above everyone else coming out of semifinals, but I didn't let them know that."

Kentucky scored a 97.3 out of 100 in the finals, just below the 98 Thompson had the team aiming for.

"We are competing against some great cheerleading teams from the past (at UK)," Thompson said. "Every year our goal is to introduce a new element not seen in cheerleading. Our goal is to raise the bar every year. That is something that allows a team to thrive."

20 Points 10 Assts.

Taylor Murray became the first Kentucky women's basketball player to have at

least 20 points and 10 assists in a SEC game during UK's recent win over Alabama. It was just the fourth 20-point, 10-assist game in UK women's history.

Alabama coach Kristy Curry called it an "incredible" performance, especially since she had just one turnover. But something else impressed Curry even more.

"I walk out when we first pull up (to Memorial Coliseum) and she's already out there on the floor. That's pretty special and you know says a lot about her," Curry said.

It does considering the struggles coach Matthew Mitchell's team has had this year. Those struggles weighed on Murray, a junior guard, at times.

"I thought she lived in a place of disappointment and discouragement for some time, and you can't get better in that. It's been some discouraging times and disappointing results, but you can't live there. You've got to pull yourself out of it, and to her credit, she has done that," Mitchell said.

"She has really listened to us. I think all of us at some point have to surrender to what's going on and not fight it. I'm really proud of her resilience and being a big enough person to admit she needed to change her attitude and she has."

Quotes of the Week

Quote of the Week: "Auburn has probably played the best of anybody in our league. They have just got a lot of weapons that are difficult to defend. The environment down there looks tremendous, too," LSU coach Will Wade on playing an Auburn, something Kentucky will do Feb. 14.

Quote of the Week 2: "She is one player that has the ability to change the game in one swing. If she was a man, she would be worth a million dollars," UK softball coach Rachel Lawson on third baseman Abby Cheek.

Quote of the Week 3: "I really want to be a politician. Not the president, that's a little too high. Maybe a senator or representative. Maybe the mayor of my home town. I really have an interest in politics," UK pitcher Justin Lewis on what he would like to do after baseball.



Cheer coach Jomo Thompson challenged his team to start the year and it responded by winning a third straight national championship. (Vicky Graff Photo)