

Winning At Louisville Looks Like Much More Difficult Task Now For Kentucky



by Larry Vaught

Several weeks ago Mike Pratt told me that he thought Louisville was being underestimated not only by University of Kentucky fans, but also nationally.

His reasoning was that interim coach David Padgett did a solid job holding the program together last year after Rick Pitino was fired and left a good foundation for new coach Chris Mack, the former head coach at Xavier.

"The program was in disarray when Padgett took over and there was only so much he could do before a full-time coach took over," said Pratt, the former UK All-American who is the UK Radio Network analyst. "Last year was tough on Padgett but he got as much out of the team as he could and they have a lot of key guys that returned. They are a year older, year tougher. Now they have a coach who can hold their feet to the fire and I think they are going to be a lot better than many people think."

Certainly Kentucky fans were expecting not only a win at Louisville Dec. 29 when the season opened, but likely a relatively easy win. Now that has changed.

Kentucky lost in overtime Saturday to Seton Hall, a team Louisville beat by five points. Seton Hall coach Kevin Willard said UK was the more physical team but Louisville was by far the better shooting team.

Louisville knocked off Michigan State and had a chance to win at Indiana.

"They also hung with Tennessee and Tennessee is a heck of a team," Pratt said. "Louisville is gaining confidence and that's going to be a tough game for Kentucky."

Louisville's win over Michigan State did not shock Sporting News columnist Mike DeCourcy, either. He's known Mack for nearly 20 years and respects the way he coaches.

"I got to know Chris as young coach breaking into the business and got to know him very well when he was working for Sean Miller as his top assistant at Xavier and then as he became head coach there," DeCourcy said.

There is one given with Mack's team no matter where's coaching.

"One thing I can tell you beyond doubt is that Chris Mack does as well any coach in college basketball in getting his team to play with competitive toughness," DeCourcy said. "His kids do not back down. That is not optional in his program.

"Louisville basketball will be very entertaining with him as coach. His team's number one strength is toughness. Next would

be a productive offense and getting good shooters good shots. They have to evolve on defense and that is not really his bread and butter but they are going to be a lot better than many people want to believe this year."

DeCourcy said Louisville offers "great facilities, great tradition" for Mack to use as shown by the surprisingly good first recruiting class he signed despite the threat of FBI and NCAA investigations hanging over the program.

"He is collecting talent. To be able to do what he has so far, Louisville fans should be excited," DeCourcy said.

Kentucky fans overall are not excited. The Cats lost by 34 points to Duke and then lost in overtime to a three-loss Seton Hall, the same team that lost by 23 points to Nebraska, at Madison Square Garden. Kentucky has seven wins but all were at home against teams not ranked in the top 75 by college basketball stat guru Ken Pomeroy. Kentucky is also 0-2 outside of Rupp Arena and must play Louisville in the Yum Center in Louisville a week after it plays North Carolina in Chicago.

Yet Kentucky coach John Calipari insisted he was not discouraged after the Seton Hall loss.

"All in all for our kids to fight in a quote 'road game' for us and give themselves a chance to win and go to overtime, we made strides. We're a better team than we were two weeks ago," Calipari said after the loss. "I am not discouraged in any way. I hate losing. I'm not discouraged but, you know, you have a chance to win that game. Win it."

It's just that winning that game in a couple of weeks at Louisville looks much, much more difficult for UK now than it did a few weeks ago when Kentucky was perceived to be one of the nation's best teams and Louisville thought to be a team that would struggle to beat top level teams this season.

Western Hills standout Wandale Robinson, the state's top-ranked high school football player, disappointed a lot of Kentucky fans last week when he flipped his verbal commitment from Kentucky to Nebraska. He did it two days after being named the state's Mr. Football, one day after getting his All-American Bowl jersey and one day before he was named Gatorade Player of the Year and received the Paul Hornung Award.

Robinson verbally committed to UK on Nov. 1 in a ceremony at his school on the birthday of his cousin who passed away the previous month. He now admits a disagreement with the Nebraska coaching staff on Oct. 31 led to his initial commitment to UK. "We had a little conversation when things didn't go over the way they should have but over time that relationship was repaired and I began to trust them (Nebraska coaches) again. I was ultimately able to make the decision that I really wanted to make the day I originally



John Calipari says he's not discouraged by the overtime loss to Seton Hall even though UK is now 0-2 when not playing in Rupp Arena and must play at rival Louisville on Dec. 29. (Wade Upchurch Photo)

announced my commitment," Robinson said.

"Nebraska has always been my school. They were my school before I visited and once I visited, I was sold. I took all my visits to make sure I was 100 percent set on that but I was 100 percent set all the way until Oct. 31 and some things happened and I kind of fell under some pressure (to commit to UK), too.

"Before the conversation (with the Nebraska coaches on Oct. 31) I was sold on I was going to Nebraska. Then some things happened and I started to hear from a lot of people that day and things weren't going right. I couldn't tell everybody that I wanted to go out of state. Now I decided to be a man and own up to what I wanted to do."

Robinson said honoring his cousin by making his commitment on her birthday was important to him and his family but looking back he understands he should have postponed his decision. He said Kentucky coach Mark Stoops and his staff were "obviously upset" when he told them he was going to sign with Nebraska next week.

"I just explained to them why and things like that. We had a good conversation. It was a mutual understanding," Robinson said. "I have to do what I have to do and they have to do what they have to do. Things are obviously okay with me and them and I feel like I can still have a relationship with them outside of football."

Derek Anderson played a key role in helping Kentucky win the 1996 national championship and played in the NBA from 1997-2008 after being

a first round pick of the Cleveland Cavaliers. Anderson is in his first year as an assistant coach for Tim Haworth at Louisville Male High School.

If Anderson had not hurt his knee midway of his senior season when he was averaging about 17 points per game, most Kentucky fans remain convinced that UK would have won the national title that year, too. He had 674 points in 55 career games at UK along with 199 rebounds, 155 steals and 98 assists.

"Fans ask about 1997 more than anything. Wherever I go, that's what people want to know and tell me they wished I had played in '97. Twenty years later, and that's still the first comment I hear. They like the dunk I had at Louisville and say you should have played in '97. Same comments. Never change," Anderson said.

During his NBA career that included all-rookie honors as well as being part of Miami's 2006 championship team, he averaged 12 points, 3.4 assists and 3.2 assists per game. He scored 7,357 points.

Anderson, a 1997 UK graduate with a degree in pharmacy, says he makes sure his players know about his NBA career.

"They Google me (on the internet) and send me pictures and stuff. Most of them have heard of me but obviously have never seen me play live," he smiles and said. "But they have now. I go out there with them. I still eat good, don't drink or nothing. Keep the same habits so I can stay in great shape."

He was willing to help coach at Male because several players on his AAU team play for Male.

"I am wanting to get

a head coaching job, but this is just something I wanted to do to give my kids a head start. Maybe I will be a head coach in a few years," Anderson, who says he stays "connected" with his former UK teammates, said. "I just love teaching kids the game. It's awesome. You are teaching them to think the game, play hard. That's lacking now. So many kids just can't think and they are missing the game."

Kentucky Radio Network analyst Mike Pratt thought before the season started that sophomore center Nick Richards could be UK's most important player this season because of his ability to defend the rim. Despite Richards' lack of production, Pratt is not ready to give up on Richards even if coach John Calipari has significantly reduced his playing time. He's averaging just 4.1 points, 3.8 rebounds and 12 minutes per game this season.

"I still think he can be that guy. I am a Nick guy. I am totally amazed with a 7-footer that can run and jump like that," Pratt, a former UK All-American, said. "He has all those athletic skills. Makes me wish I had that and what could I do with those skills."

"He just has to get turned around. He is a mystery to the coaching staff. They are spending lots of time with Nick. For some reason, it just is not registering the way they want it to with him. He has gone backwards but doesn't mean he still can't be the guy. All he has to do is be active, just play ball. If he can do that on a consistent basis, this team can really good. It takes pressure off others with the way he can be a ter-

rific goalie if he will just do it."

Unlike some fans, Pratt doesn't think it is about a lack of effort by Richards, who drifted into no-man's land the second half of last season. He played well during UK's exhibition games in the Bahamas, but is now fourth on UK's four-man interior player rotation.

"He is willing to give the effort. I don't think he feels comfortable yet. I am not sure he really totally understands the intricacies of how to play yet," Pratt said. "He is learning. We all make the mistake of looking at that guy with long arms and runs like deer and think why can't he react."

"But sometimes it is a slow growth process. I hate that because UK needs Nick. His minimum stat sheet in any game to me should be 10 points, seven rebounds, two blocks. If he does that and the coaches feel they can trust him, he will get his minutes."

Benny Snell needs 107 yards rushing against Penn State in the Citrus Bowl Jan. 1 to become Kentucky's all-time leader rusher. He's ran for 1,305 yards and 14 touchdowns this season and has three of the top 10 single seasons in school history for both rushing yards and rushing touchdowns.

Can he break the record against No. 12 Penn State?

He has has 107 or more yards rushing in five games this season and 14 times in his career. He's averaging 22 carries per game this season but a career-low 5.0 yards per rush — a number most running backs would still love to have.