

With ailing mom in the stands (surprise!), TyTy Washington plans to carry Kentucky far in the NCAA Tournament

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic
March 16

TyTy Washington's parents were both hoopers of some acclaim at Tempe High School in Arizona, where they fell in love two decades ago. From his dad, he got grit. From his mom, poise. Together, they taught TyTy to never get too high, never get too low and never back down from a challenge. Come what may, you can handle it. Useful lessons for a family whose story can be summed up in just five words: This was not the plan.

When Washington committed to play basketball at Kentucky in May, an unexpected reality far beyond their wildest dreams, his parents planned to be at almost every game. His father, Tyrone, works for an airline, so free flights from Phoenix made that easy. But then Washington's mother, Felicia, ended up in the hospital in July, and doctors delivered devastating news. Her kidneys were failing. She needed dialysis three days a week, a Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday schedule. They advised her not to travel.

Now, on the eve of her son's NCAA Tournament debut, Felicia has a surprise. Call your mom, TyTy. She's on her way to Indianapolis. She revealed her secret this week to The Athletic: She has been training to administer her own dialysis at home (or in a hotel) with a machine roughly the size of two old VCRs that fits nicely inside a suitcase. She completed that training on Monday, got the green light from her doctor to travel during a check-up on Wednesday and is flying out the same day. She will be there when Washington and the second-seeded Wildcats face Saint Peter's on Thursday night in the first round.

"I'm so hyped. I just wanted to surprise my baby and see him live out this dream," she says. "I'm so excited, you'd have to call it over-excited. I packed last week for this. I think it is really going to be important for TyTy, so that he knows for sure that I'm doing OK. I try to hide a lot from him, and I think I hide it well, but every time he asks me, 'Mom, you OK?' and I say yes, I'm good, he kind of looks at me like, yeah, right. For him to see me there, he will know that my last OKs are true. My mom is here. That means she's getting well."

Felicia is in the process of getting screened to be placed on the transplant list. She has several friends and family already lined up to be tested and see if they're a match to donate a kidney. TyTy told her early on, "If you need anything from my body, Mom, you can have it." She says she'd refuse. All she wants from her

son is to know that he's living his best life and not worried about her health, which has been an issue for some time now.

Before the kidney failure, Felicia lost vision in one eye as a complication of diabetes. She was hospitalized with COVID-19 in 2020. These days, she's often so weak that a wheelchair is the most feasible way to get around. It's humbling for a woman who recalls being "stronger than most girls" as a high school star who could drop 30 points on a given night, no problem. The same woman who used to wear out young TyTy on a basketball court, teaching him how to finish through contact and taunting him when he didn't.

"It's hard, because that's his best friend," Tyrone says. "Now you're at Kentucky and your mom can't come to every game, and even when she does come, you can see the pain in her eyes. He's thinking, 'Damn, if I was at home, I could see my mom every day.' I know he's dealing with a lot, but he's got to worry about basketball first. We tell him, 'We got home. Go do you.' His mom gave him the courage and strength to do that."

Washington, an All-SEC guard as a freshman and a projected lottery pick in the 2022 NBA Draft, politely declined any discussion of his mother's illness during a recent wide-ranging, hour-long interview with The Athletic. But he did answer the question John Calipari so often asks his players, as a means to search their souls, and it was indeed revealing. What's your why?

"Most definitely my family, my mom and my dad, because they sacrificed so much for me to be in the position I am today," TyTy says. "I owe it to them. Whenever I feel like not doing something, I always just think of my mom and my dad. When I go out there every night, I play for them. I want them to be proud not only of the basketball player I've become but the young man I've become as well. I'm a lot of miles away from home, so when they do get a chance to come out here, I just want them to see my maturity level coming up and see the same kid they raised, just a little bigger and stronger. I'm always trying to do my best to make them happy."

Tyrone Washington was raised by grandparents who couldn't read or write. His oldest brother got caught up in a gang and dropped out of high school. Tyrone, who did "a lot of dumb stuff" and was often suspended himself, used basketball as a means to an end. Even if he scraped by on Cs and Ds, love of the game kept him in school long enough to earn the first diploma by any of the men in his family.

Felicia Caldwell was a certified bucket at Tempe High, and Tyrone, the kid from the other side of town, was instantly smitten. "She was a superstar, all-state this and

that. I was her sidekick," Tyrone says. "I could score 30, and she'd have 35." Felicia played her senior season pregnant. She and Tyrone both gave junior college ball a shot, but soon all their time and attention was on their little boy. Just so happens, TyTy caught the basketball bug too.

By the time he could walk, they noticed a lot of small household items started disappearing. Felicia finally figured out why: Her toddler was mimicking the NBA players who were always on their television screen. He was slam-dunking everything he touched into the trash can. So they bought him a basketball hoop and the real training began. Before long, Tyrone was taking TyTy to outdoor courts in 120-degree Arizona heat for workouts.

"He taught me how to be a man first, before anything," TyTy says. "Those workouts were really hard, especially if it was just me and him. If there's nobody around, he has the green light to spaz on me."

And what did spazzing look like?

"Whatever comes to mind in that moment," Tyrone says. "It could be cuss words, just being tough. I tell him, hey, life is tough. I think me cussing him out at 5 and 6 years old prepared him for moments like this now. He got cussed out the other night, stayed focused and kept playing."

It's true. Calipari benched Washington — and lit into him on the sideline — during the SEC quarterfinals against Vanderbilt last weekend. TyTy responded with 17 of his 25 points in the 12 minutes following that ass-chewing.

"I would've yelled at him if I was the coach," Tyrone says. "You're out here passing up shots and turning the ball over? They got a right to cuss you out. I think a lot of parents get mad, but what words did he call you? The F-bomb? As long as you didn't call him anything racist or the B-word, hey, figure it out. From me and his mom's point of view, as hoopers ourselves, we're going to harp on the small things. We just always tried to push him to be better, be better, be better, so when he came here and started getting cussed out, we were like, 'OK, so?'"

"If you go to Kentucky, you're chasing ghosts. You're chasing history. Everybody that came before you, you gotta take what they took, the cussing out, the whatever, and hopefully get the same results. He understood the challenge of coming to Kentucky. He understood once you get here, you're not the first five-star. John Wall played here. You're nothing special. You're just another freshman coming in trying to earn your stripes."

Dad was a pass-first point guard who couldn't shoot to save his life. So Tyrone instilled his own selfless style and made sure TyTy developed a jumper. They repped it until that thing was pure from all over the

court. Today, he's as lethal with a floater and elbow pull-up as he is from 3-point range.

Mom was in charge of teaching good footwork and crafty finishes around the rim. She could still bully him to the bucket until he was at least 13, back when he was a short and pudgy little fella who wasn't on anybody's radar.

"She doesn't get enough credit," Tyrone says. "But mentally, that's where he gets the edge from. She's even-keeled. I was always up and down. I was one of them hyper kids. She taught him mentally, 'Hey, we gotta stay here (in the middle), gotta stay focused. Good or bad, gotta smile.' I think that's where he gets it."

Ask anyone to describe Washington's game now and it's all about pace, how tough it is to speed him up, and demeanor. He's steady. He rarely seems to be trying too hard. Everything happens within the flow of a game. It's heady stuff for a freshman, especially when he's surrounded by juniors, seniors and super seniors on this unusually old Kentucky roster. Most folks around the program describe Washington as mature beyond his years. On a team full of veterans, this kid is the glue.

He feels very much like the key to these Cats making a deep NCAA Tournament run. That's strange to think now. Because this was not the plan.

Just a couple of years ago, Washington's parents still thought about basketball as a way their son could earn a college scholarship — and degree. One-and-done? Never dreamed of it. They tried to talk him into committing during an unofficial visit to Santa Clara before his junior year in high school. It's right in the heart of Silicon Valley, and Tyrone figured a job at Google or Facebook or some tech start-up would follow.

By the summer before his senior season, Washington was a fringe top-100 recruit. He committed to Creighton in November of 2020. He would've signed that fall, but there was an issue with his preferred jersey number — No. 3, which had been worn by former star Doug McDermott and was sort of unofficially retired — so Washington delayed signing until the spring while they tried to work it out. Washington wears that number to honor a family friend who was killed and because of his Allen Iverson fandom. Not moving swiftly to accommodate him was a fateful error by the Bluejays, as it turned out. By last March, coach Greg McDermott was embroiled in controversy for his "I need everybody to stay on the plantation" speech in the locker room after a loss. Washington decommitted, and his recruitment blew up.

He jumped into the top 50 and then top 25 of the rankings, leading his high school

team to the semifinals at GEICO Nationals along the way.

"God had different plans," Tyrone says. "Coach Mac, I love the guy. I don't think he's racist. I don't think TyTy thinks he's racist. I just think at that moment, everything happened so fast and TyTy just said, 'I need a fresh start.' Once he decommitted, it was like he finally got the recognition he deserved. When he got the UCLA, Kansas, Arizona offers, it was special. We'd been trying to get an Arizona offer forever, I ain't gonna lie. Because we're from Arizona and we were trying to chase Mike Bibby. That's a personal friend of ours. But then he got the Kentucky offer and it was like, 'Oh, wow, rock-star status.'"

They had no idea. The NCAA's long-overdue relaxation of name, image and likeness rules over the summer have proven to be a game-changer, especially for star athletes at blue blood programs like Kentucky. Washington has cleaned up in NIL deals since arriving on campus, which he zips around in a free Porsche. His wide, bright smile and playful nature make marketing magic, and he's well into six figures in earnings. He turned down one offer to endorse shaving products because, "I'm literally the only person on the team that does not have any facial hair at all."

He has his own signature combo meal at Fazoli's, his face has been plastered on giant billboards in Times Square and his team is among the favorites to win a national championship over the next three weeks.

"Now sitting back and thinking on it, revisiting the past, realizing I was actually going to go to Creighton and ended up here instead, it's not only unreal to me, but it feels like a blessing as well," he says. "I think about it a lot. Every time I walk through this gym, it's just all the history. Downstairs, there's a wall where all the legends, when they come back, they write their name. I got to witness Immanuel Quickley, Tyrese Maxey and Isaiah Jackson write their name on the wall recently. It was crazy. I was thinking, 'I was going to Creighton but now I'm here at the same school as John Wall, Anthony Davis and Devin Booker. They got coached by the same dude I'm getting coached by now. It's just really crazy to me.'"

When Washington is at his best, Kentucky is dominant. He averaged 14.3 points, 4.2 assists, 3.9 rebounds and 1.4 steals in the Wildcats' 23 victories with him in the lineup. He shot 49.4 percent from the field and 38.3 percent from 3-point range in those wins. In seven losses, Washington averaged 7.9 points, 3.3 assists, 2.1 rebounds, shot 31.2 percent from the field and 20 percent from deep. More than half of those defeats included either an

in-game injury or a hobbled Washington trying to fight through obvious pain.

He cramped up over the final 10 minutes of a loss at LSU on Jan. 4, rolled his ankle early in the loss at Auburn on Jan. 22, rolled it worse in a win over Florida on Feb. 12 and had to be helped off three days later after trying to play on it at Tennessee. Only then did he finally shut it down for about 10 days. Washington, who is relentlessly happy, the guy whose "Griddy" dance has become the team's official post-game celebration ritual, looked absolutely miserable watching from the bench as the Wildcats got clobbered in Knoxville.

"I was just frustrated I couldn't be out there with my team," he says. "I'm not saying if I would've finished the game we would've won, but where I come from, we win as one and we lose as one. So even if we were going to lose that game still, I wanted to be out there with the team to keep fighting, keep trying to come back."

As the TV cameras kept showing a frustrated Washington on UK's sideline, his parents saw something else.

"He was worried," Tyrone says. "That whole month and a half, he was not really practicing but trying to fight through it and play, telling himself he's healthy when he's really not. We're texting him, 'How you feeling?' He's saying, 'I'm good, I'm good.' But I know my child. She knows our child. She's watching him and saying, 'He ain't healthy.' It's hard to tell a kid to sit down when he wants to play basketball. We ain't built to sit down. We ain't built to say, 'Well, the NBA Draft.' I don't care about that. You came here to win a championship."

"So he fought through it. But that Tennessee game, I saw the look in his eyes, and he was worried. Not knowing what the MRI might say. ESPN kept showing his face. Dude, he's still a kid — a kid that's hurt — and I know he was sitting there thinking, 'I might be out for the season.'"

Washington sat for two games, then returned looking like a shell of himself. Slowly but surely, he has worked his way back. Folks who know him best say they can still see lingering effects of the injury, but they also watched him swish 4 of 5 3s in the SEC quarterfinals and grind out 17 points, six boards, four assists and three steals on an off shooting day against Tennessee in the league semifinals. He made clutch plays in that one to almost erase a large second-half deficit. There was hope in what Washington did in Tampa last week.

He hopes it has set the stage for the kind of NCAA Tournament run that leaves a legacy at a place where that's hard to do.

"I want to show everyone in the world that I'm a winner first, that I'm a team guy always," Washington says. "People

remember the teams that go far, and we all have the same goal, which is to get another banner, just go and get No. 9.”

So much of that pursuit, so much of the hope for Kentucky to win a ninth national championship, rests on that heavily wrapped left ankle of his. Or maybe not. Maybe it’s his spirit that carries the Cats. The grit he got from his dad, the poise he got from his mom. The love she’s bringing with her to Indianapolis.

“When I saw him at Tennessee, that picture just said it all,” Felicia says. “That’s one of those times he needed his mom to be in the stands. I’m not saying I would’ve healed him somehow, but maybe his mind would’ve been off the ankle. And maybe now this is more of a mental thing than physical. You know, sometimes when you get hurt for a minute and then you come back, you’re physically fine before you’re mentally ready to overcome it. Maybe a mother’s love would help. That’s one of those times I would say to him: Go hard, leave it all out there, have no regrets.

“It’s funny, because around this time last year, he won a big tournament against Paolo Banchemo’s team, and I caught him just kind of staring off in the distance. I said, ‘What’s up?’

“He said, ‘Mom, this time next year, I’ll be playing in March Madness.’ I remember saying, ‘Oh, that’s dope, son, but first we gotta get there.’ This has been on his mind for a long time, and look, we did make it. We’re here. In March Madness. And it’s so exciting I want to cry.”

Waiting for UK in East Region: Final Four coaches, a pair of ex-Cats — and Murray State

By Mark Story | Lexington Herald Leader
March 14

A look at the 2022 men’s basketball NCAA Tournament East Region — which includes the No. 2 seed Kentucky Wildcats:

THE DEFENDING CHAMPS

Last season’s national champion, Coach Scott Drew’s Baylor Bears, are the No. 1 seed in the East Region.

Baylor (26-6) will enter the NCAA tourney with an impressive 18 victories in Quads 1 and 2, but the Bears’ repeat chances have been compromised by injuries.

Guard LJ Cryer, Baylor’s leading scorer (13.5 points per game), is listed as game-to-game due to a foot injury that has caused him to miss 13 games.

Forward Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua, the Bears’ leading rebounder (6.8 per game to go with 8.4 points), is out for the year after suffering a knee injury.

Baylor lost Top 60 freshman Langston Love to a torn ACL before the season even

started.

In addition to the injury attrition, Baylor lost four starters from the team that made a dominant run through last season’s NCAA Tournament.

Nevertheless, Drew had Baylor playing well down the stretch, as the Bears won their final five regular-season games to share the Big 12 title with Kansas.

However, Oklahoma upset Baylor 72-67 in the quarterfinals of the Big 12 Tournament.

That’s a bad omen for Baylor’s 2022 NCAA tourney fate. Since the NCAA Tournament expanded to at least 64 teams in 1985, no team that failed to win a game in its league tourney has gone on to claim the national championship.

MEET UK’S FIRST FOE

A private university located in Jersey City, New Jersey, Saint Peter’s (19-11) is the East Region No. 15 seed after winning the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference Tournament as the No. 2 seed.

(That league’s regular-season champion, Rick Pitino’s Iona Gaels, was stunned by No. 9 seed Rider in the MAAC tourney. Had Iona won the league tournament, would Kentucky be opening NCAA play against its former head coach?)

Saint Peter’s is coached by Shaheen Holloway, the former Seton Hall guard.

A longtime assistant to current Seton Hall head man Kevin Willard, Holloway is in his fourth season as Peacocks head coach and has gone 61-53. After going 10-22 in his first season, Holloway has produced three straight winning records at Saint Peter’s — 18-9, 14-11 and this season’s 19-11.

As a player, Holloway might be best remembered for making a game-winning layup that beat Oregon in the 2000 NCAA Tournament round of 64.

The Peacocks are a defensive-oriented team that scored 66.9 points per game this season while allowing 61.8. Saint Peter’s has eight players averaging between five and 11 points per game.

Junior guard Daryl Banks III is the top scorer (11.0 points); forwards KC Ndefo (10.6 points and 6.2 rebounds) and Fousseyni Drame (7.2 points, 6.8 rebounds) are the top two front-line players.

Against major conference competition this season, Saint Peter’s lost 91-70 at St. John’s and 85-71 at Providence, both Big East teams.

AN IN-STATE SHOWDOWN?

If Kentucky defeats Saint Peter’s, the Wildcats could earn their first-ever meeting with an in-state foe. The winner of that 2-15 game will face the victor between No. 7 seed Murray State (30-2) and No. 10 seed San Francisco (24-9).

Amazingly for teams that share the

same state, UK and Murray have never played in men’s hoops.

Coach Matt McMahon’s Racers enter the NCAA tourney on a 20-game win streak.

Going solely by the metrics, the Ohio Valley Conference regular-season and tournament champions are under-seeded. Murray State stands No. 21 in the NCAA’s NET Rankings and No. 27 in the Pomeroy Ratings.

OVC Player of the Year KJ Williams, a 6-10, 245-pound senior, leads the Racers in scoring (18.2 points) and rebounding (8.6).

Guard Tevin Brown, a 6-5, 175-pound senior, gives MSU star-caliber play (16.9 points, 5.5 rebounds, 3.0 assists, 1.4 steals) in the backcourt.

Murray’s only two losses came vs. East Tennessee, 66-58, on a neutral court in November and at Auburn, 71-58, in December. The Racers have a road victory, 74-72, at Memphis.

If the two Kentucky teams make it to the round of 32, expect a super-charged showdown.

EX-CATS VS. THE CATS?

Two former Kentucky Wildcats guards are in the East Region with UK.

UCLA’s Johnny Juzang, who averaged 2.9 points as a little-used reserve at Kentucky in 2019-20, has become a full-fledged standout playing for Mick Cronin in Westwood. The 6-6, 210-pound junior is averaging 16.0 points, 4.6 rebounds and 1.8 assists for the No. 4 seed Bruins.

For Kentucky to face Juzang, both UK and UCLA will have to reach the East Region finals.

Texas guard Devin Askew, who started at point guard for Kentucky during the Wildcats’ 9-16 slog in 2020-21, is now a Longhorns reserve.

The 6-3, 198-pound sophomore has started three of 32 games for No. 6 seed Texas this season. Askew is averaging 2.2 points and 1.4 assists. A potential meeting between the Cats and Askew would take place in the round of 16.

FINAL FOUR COACHES

In addition to UK’s Calipari, there are four other coaches in the East Region who have taken teams to the Final Four.

Chris Beard. The first-year Texas head man led his previous employer, Texas Tech, to an NCAA tourney runner-up finish in 2019.

Mick Cronin. The former Louisville assistant and Murray State head coach led UCLA to last season’s national semifinals, where the Bruins lost a 93-90 overtime classic to No. 1-ranked Gonzaga.

Scott Drew. The Baylor head man led the Bears to the 2021 NCAA title.

Shaka Smart. The coach of No. 9 seed Marquette directed VCU on a Cinderella

run from the First Four to the Final Four in 2011.

Calipari, of course, led Kentucky to Final Four appearances in 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2015, winning the Wildcats' eighth NCAA title in 2012. He also coached Massachusetts (1996) and Memphis (2008) to Final Fours.

ASPIRING TO THE FINAL FOUR

In No. 3 seed Purdue (27-6), the East Region also includes one of the top coaches in the country who has yet to make a trip to the national semifinals.

Matt Painter has led the Boilermakers to five Sweet 16s and the 2019 Elite Eight but is still seeking Purdue's first trip to the national semifinals since Joe Barry Carroll and Co. way back in 1980.

BLUE BLOODS

The East Region is heavy on teams with multiple NCAA championships in their past.

No. 4 seed UCLA has won 11 national championships.

No. 2 seed UK has won eight.

No. 8 seed North Carolina has won six.

No. 12 seed Indiana — which will face Wyoming in the First Four for the right to advance to the round of 64 — has five NCAA championships.

All three of the other blue bloods are on the opposite side of the East Region bracket from UK, meaning the Wildcats could only face one of the others in the round of eight.

How TyTy Washington made SEC Tournament a win for Kentucky even if UK loses this weekend

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal
March 12

Even after TyTy Washington returned from a lower leg injury, there were plenty of reasons to wonder if Kentucky basketball's star freshman was playing at 100%.

So as Washington tried to work through a prolonged shooting slump it is only natural that some frustration might creep in. After all, he faced not only the pressure of helping the Wildcats to a deep March Madness run but also protecting NBA draft stock that has him widely projected as a possible top-10 pick.

No wonder then that Washington bristled at some hard coaching from John Calipari during Kentucky's 77-71 win over Vanderbilt in the SEC Tournament quarterfinals Friday.

"At the start of the second half I wasn't playing through bumps, and he pulled me out, and he got on me, and I got really upset," Washington said. "It was just like everybody else on the team was just telling me, like, 'You're OK. Don't let him get to your head. Be you. He wants what's best for you.'

"Everybody on the team knows what I can do and what I can bring for this team. When I have my teammates pushing me, giving me confidence, then that's going to be the result."

There were not many reasons to worry about Kentucky's ceiling heading into post-season play, but one of the few lingering concerns was Washington's form.

Since returning from his second lower leg injury of the season on Feb. 26 at Arkansas, Washington had converted just 9 of 28 shots and 2 of 9 3-point attempts in his three games before the SEC Tournament.

Each of Kentucky's primary seven rotation players has proven capable of leading the Wildcats when needed, but no active player on the roster can match Washington's unique skill set.

"His ability to make shots and make free-throws and make floaters, he is skilled," Calipari said. "The defense that he can play because he has got some physical toughness and size makes him where he is on both sides of the ball."

Washington started SEC Tournament play on a high note, hitting three of his first four shots, but he missed his next four shots and lost a key turnover in Vanderbilt's 13-0 run early in the second half. Suddenly, it looked like Washington's inconsistent recent form had reared its head again.

But Calipari's message sunk home.

He scored five points in a 9-0 run that gave Kentucky the lead for good. With Kentucky leading by just three points and 6:04 remaining, Washington hit the first of back-to-back 3s. He would score 12 of Kentucky's final 16 points, including four free throws in the final 20 seconds to seal the victory.

Washington finished the game with 25 points on 8-of-17 shooting. He made 4 of 5 3s and 5 of 6 free throws.

"It's just him getting back in a rhythm," junior point guard Sahvir Wheeler said of Washington. "And also going back to the fact that the depth of our team, and it can be anyone's night. At any given time, someone can step up. Someone can make plays, and that's the credit to the coaching staff. Again, that's the buy-in to sharing the ball, when we are playing for each other, and when a guy is hot, finding him and instilling confidence in him while we're in the game play."

The performance marked Washington's fifth 20-point showing of the season but his first since Jan. 15. In 7 of 11 appearances since scoring a season-high 28 in the blow-out of Tennessee that day, Washington had failed to reach double figures.

Early conference tournament losses from Baylor and Auburn have increased Kentucky's chances of earning a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament on Sunday, but

the Wildcats' March Madness prospects are unlikely to change dramatically with a No. 1 seed versus a No. 2 seed.

What can change Kentucky's outlook is Washington regaining the star form he had found before injuries. For that reason, Friday's win may make the SEC Tournament a productive one for Kentucky regardless of what happens next in Tampa.

"I'm playing with an older group of guys, so I know they all believe in me," Washington said. "The coaching staff believes in me.

"... When I was hurt, Davion (Mintz), Kellan (Grady), they both stepped up tremendously, so it's just like I'm not going to make it about me. I'm just going to get treatment, get back in the gym and stuff like that. Just try to get back to 100%, but I know my teammates got my back."

One Rebound at a Time, Oscar Tshiebwe Has Electrified a City—and a Sport

By Kevin Sweeney | Sports Illustrated
March 11

A year ago at this time, Kentucky men's basketball was mired in its worst season since the Great Depression, and all Oscar Tshiebwe could do was watch.

Oh, and talk. He did a lot of talking.

Tshiebwe arrived in Lexington with about six weeks to go in a season Kentucky fans would like nothing more than to forget ever happened. As a transfer who played 10 games early in the year at West Virginia, Tshiebwe wasn't eligible to play for the remainder of that 9-16 season. But as he watched from the sidelines as the Wildcats floundered through a COVID-19-impacted season, the big man made it known to his teammates that things would be different next year.

"I'm so fast; they can't mess with me," Kentucky center Lance Ware recalls Tshiebwe boasting from the sidelines. "They're going to have to double-team me."

Ware and his teammates were skeptical at the time. They aren't anymore.

"He wasn't lying," Ware laughs.

All those boasts have come true. Tshiebwe is too fast to handle. Teams do have to double-team (and sometimes triple-team) him. And even that hasn't been enough to stop Oscar, whose record-setting rebound totals have him in the mix for National Player of the Year and have elevated Kentucky from the shadows of last season's disappointment back into a title contender.

The Oscar Tshiebwe you see on the court is steely eyed and fiercely competitive—seemingly capable of not just dunking on you but tearing the rim off

in the process. But off the court, Oscar is cheerful, rarely found without that wide smile on his face that everyone in Lexington has fallen in love with. Just last week, he posted a video to his Instagram story of himself singing songs from the movie *Moana* while on the training table, perhaps the clearest proof that the 22-year-old is among the gentlest of giants.

“When the game comes, he turns on his superhero alter ego,” Wildcats junior Keion Brooks says. “He knows he’s the baddest thing out there, everybody else knows it and then it’s just, What can you do to stop it?”

But a pair of glasses and business-casual attire wouldn’t be enough to make Oscar blend into a crowd the way Clark Kent could. At 6’9”, 255 pounds and 6% body fat, one tends to stand out in any room they’re in—even on a basketball court.

The path Tshiebwe has taken to become one of college basketball’s best players not only isn’t straight, it has hardly been paved. He grew up in the Democratic Republic of Congo and didn’t play basketball until he was 14. His father, a pastor, was poisoned to death when Oscar was just 12. Oscar left the rest of his family behind to come to the U.S. at 15, spent time playing JV basketball, had stops at multiple high schools and transferred midseason from West Virginia after being a preseason all-conference selection heading into his sophomore year. In his 22 years, Oscar has experienced more hardship than most people will in their entire lives. Yet he attacks every day with a relentlessly positive spirit that sticks with everyone he spends time with.

“Oscar has a bright light about himself, and you can’t dim it; it doesn’t ever turn off,” Brooks says. “That’s just who he is.”

Even before he picked up a basketball, Oscar learned the most valuable skill he possesses on the hardwood: his fight. He says he first found his love for physicality from his dad, who’d set down punishments like push-ups or hours-long runs for Oscar as a child. Oscar was a fighter, and he wasn’t going to let anyone forget it once he came to the States.

“I cannot let people bully me,” Oscar says. “They do not know how I grew up.”

Perhaps that’s why Oscar doesn’t mind the beating he takes from opposing teams desperate to keep him off the glass. In fact, he embraces it.

“I love contact. ... Coaches sending three people to try to push me, I love that because that’s when I build a tree and say, Nobody’s moving me,” Tshiebwe says. “If you come in, I’m going to hit you first before you touch me.”

The big man is such a matchup problem for opponents that sometimes the refs even have trouble officiating him. But his

coach, John Calipari, has an answer for that.

“The best thing you can do, do you want me to give you a secret?” says Calipari. “Recruit a guy who is 255 pounds with a 7-foot-4 wingspan who goes after the ball. You recruit that guy.”

The players most familiar with Tshiebwe’s physicality on the boards? Brooks and Ware, who go against him every day in practice. Kentucky regularly does a drill in which the rim gets covered up and two players go one-on-one for rebounds clanking off that covered hoop. Whoever grabs three rebounds first wins ... and the loser goes over to a treadmill to run.

“It’s a drill that’s built for him,” Kentucky assistant coach Orlando Antigua says.

It gets competitive—and physical. Far more physical than a game would ever be, Ware says. He says he used to win about half the time last year when going up against Olivier Sarr and Isaiah Jackson. Now?

“You have to get lucky and hope the ball bounces to your side,” Ware says. “If it doesn’t, you just don’t have a chance to win.”

“If I can get my hand on the ball, it’s a success for me,” Brooks jokes. He says he has beaten Tshiebwe in the drill once in the 15 or so times they’ve gone against each other this year.

Teammates, opponents, coaches and fans alike all marvel at Tshiebwe’s record-setting rebound totals. His 20 rebounds against Duke in the team’s season opener made a statement, but the 28 he snatched against Western Kentucky was his true coming-out party as one of the sport’s biggest stars. He averages more rebounds per game (15.3) than any player has in at least the last 30 years and tops the nation in both offensive and defensive rebounding rate, per KenPom. While he won’t surpass some of the seemingly unbeatable rebounding totals players from the 1950s and ’60s posted, his season this year will go down as one of the more impressive statistical seasons of the 2000s.

Those eye-popping stats have earned Oscar rock-star status in Lexington, almost 8,000 miles away from where he first picked up a basketball in the Congo. It’s why fans swarm him after every game hoping for an autograph, where he signs for as long as he’s allowed to by Kentucky and stadium staff. With new name, image and likeness (NIL) rules, Tshiebwe could easily sign autographs exclusively for money—ESPN reported that former Ohio State QB Quinn Ewers landed a \$1.4 million contract to sign autographs in 2021, for instance. But even after Tshiebwe recently received clearance to make NIL deals after a complex process due to his immigration status

as an F1 student visa recipient, you’ll still find him out signing autographs postgame and not asking for a dime in return.

“People say, ‘You know you can charge people for what you’re doing,’ and I say, ‘Of course I know,’” Tshiebwe says. “Sometimes it’s not all about money. ... These people, they’re going to remember what you did in the past, and they’re going to help you.”

Players and coaches who spend time around Oscar every day say the gentle giant hasn’t changed who he is, even with all the fame he has gained in the last year. “He has been the same guy,” Antigua says.

A lot of that can be attributed to Oscar’s faith. He hosts pregame Bible studies in his hotel room before road games that nearly the entire team has attended, and he also puts together Bible studies on campus.

“It’s up to God for him to decide whether we win or not,” Tshiebwe says. “For me to lead the Bible study is to show people it’s not about me, it’s not about the team, it’s all about God. We have to put God first in everything we do.”

The Bible studies have brought the team closer together and helped them navigate life in the college basketball pressure-cooker that is Lexington.

“In Lexington, Kentucky basketball is everything, and in a way we get, for lack of a better word, worshipped. We’re not normal people at times,” Brooks says. “So to take a step away and be able to give everything you’ve got to God and have a conversation about it is great because it keeps you grounded.”

Tshiebwe’s spirituality has helped him navigate losing his father and leaving his mother and the rest of his family behind in the Congo while he chased his dream. And now, as first reported by *The Athletic*, money from NIL opportunities will allow Oscar’s mother to come to the United States ... hopefully in time to see him play basketball in person for the first time in the NCAA tournament.

“She doesn’t even know how many people can get in a basketball gym. She probably thinks 1,000, 2,000,” Tshiebwe says. “That would probably be the best day of her life, just to see how many people are watching her son playing basketball.”

So what’s next for men’s college basketball’s biggest star?

First, he wants to drop 50 points and 30 rebounds in the first game his mom is able to watch him play. And while there has been plenty of speculation about Oscar’s basketball future and whether he’ll return to Kentucky or take his rebounding talents to the next level, his mind is on other things. While he’s focused on finishing this year strong, he recently hatched a plan to write books to share teachings from God.

And not just one book—four!

With a smile, Oscar opens the Notes app on his phone and shows off the list of ideas he put together earlier in February. One is entitled Stop Burying Things That Are Not Dead. Another: Kindness Is Everything.

The last on the list?

How to Become a Champion.

In one month's time, he might have a lot more material for that one. But one piece of advice that likely won't make the cut?

Recruit someone like Oscar Tshiebwe.

With Orlando Antigua, Kentucky's John Calipari has his right-hand man back. And it shows

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic
March 10

The lunch crowd is heavy at Carson's on Main Street the day after Kentucky beat Ole Miss to cap just the 14th undefeated home record in 46 years at Rupp Arena, an exclamation point on this bounce-back season for the Wildcats. For regular folks, there are no available tables. For Orlando Antigua? He's running late, but texts: Tell them you're with me. "Oh, Coach O? Right this way." And suddenly there is, in fact, a table ready. Seating for six, even though it's a party of two. Gotta leave room for the 6-foot-7 former Harlem Globetrotter to stretch out. Even before Antigua arrives, his go-to drink, an Arnold Palmer, is delivered to the table by a waitress who rattles off a few of his favorite menu items.

He's grinning, per usual, when he eventually slides into a chair after pausing several times to acknowledge the chorus of "Coach O!" greetings on his way through the restaurant. It's true what the song says: Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came. Antigua raises his glass. Cheers to that.

"It's been great, man," the Wildcats assistant coach says. "Being back here, I'd say it's like putting on a real comfortable pair of expensive shoes."

He can afford lots of those with a three-year, \$3 million contract, which was worth every penny for Kentucky to get him back to Lexington. Antigua followed John Calipari here the first time from Memphis in 2009, and together they launched one of the wildest runs in program history. They signed five consecutive No. 1-ranked recruiting classes, made four Elite Eights, three Final Fours, two NCAA championship games and won the 2012 national title. As a parting gift when he left to become head coach at South Florida, Antigua helped land the incoming class of Karl-Anthony Towns, Devin Booker, Tyler Ulis and Trey Lyles, draft picks all and key pieces of the

38-1 team in 2015.

"We did OK, huh?" Antigua says with his signature laugh, outsized and animated, like a guy who just dumped a bucket of confetti on the Washington Generals. "It's hard to catch lightning in a bottle once, let alone twice, but we're definitely trying to do it again."

While they were a single shot away in 2017 and 2019, the Cats have not been back to a Final Four without Antigua (or a heavy dose of his influence on the roster), and they cratered completely last season. The 9-16 record was UK's worst in almost a century and represented the polar opposite of those glory days with Antigua, who crashed and burned at USF but was thriving again as an assistant at Illinois. He was back to gobbling up top talent and developing it, helping turn Kofi Cockburn into an All-America center and turn the Fighting Illini into a No. 1 seed in last year's NCAA Tournament.

Calipari, who lost another trusted assistant, Kenny Payne, to the NBA two years ago, felt compelled to shake up his staff last offseason. That plan got fast-tracked when Tony Barbee left to become head coach at Central Michigan and Joel Justus took a job on Bobby Hurley's staff at Arizona State. Just like that, the door was open for an old friend to walk through. For Calipari to try to recapture the magic.

"I think everyone knows what we were able to do with Orlando as part of our staff," the Hall of Fame head coach said upon announcing Antigua's homecoming last spring. "I am excited that he wanted to be back here with us to get our program back where we know it needs to be."

That wasn't a very hard sell. Turns out, Antigua never really left Lexington. His daughter, Olivia, graduated from Kentucky in the fall. He'd been sneaking back into town sporadically for years. He tells a funny story about university president Eli Capilouto finding him struggling to assemble a dresser during move-in weekend for Olivia at the honors dorm in 2016. Capilouto's eyes widened. "He goes, 'Coach O! What are you doing here?' I said, 'Just dad duty this time! But don't y'all have some engineering majors who can help me with this?' We got a big laugh out of that," Antigua says. "But you know, this is home. It has always felt like home. We've kept so many friends here. My wife loves Lexington, loves Keeneland, loves the horses, loves the town, loves the people here."

A lot has changed since he moved away — his regular lunch spot now, Carson's, didn't exist back then, and there was still a giant hole in the middle of downtown where the City Center tower eventually sprang up — but he is comforted by simple staples. He still crushes a Lexingtonian

salad at Malone's.

"If it was any other place calling, any other coach but Cal, I wouldn't have even entertained leaving Illinois," Antigua says. "When this opportunity came up, though, it was just too good. When Cal mentioned that he was thinking about it, I said, 'Coach, I'm here for whatever you need.' I knew exactly what my role would be, how I could help, what I could bring to the program and to Cal."

There was one minor hesitation. Antigua knows how crazy Kentucky fans can be, and he knew what they were saying about him on social media, message boards and call-in radio shows. Mired in the misery of last season, pining for the good old days when it was more of a surprise not to make the Final Four, many fans had reached an oversimplified conclusion: Antigua was the secret sauce, the magic bullet, the answer.

"I'm just a spoke in the wheel. I'm just a piece. I'm not the answer," Antigua says. "I was concerned about that perception, because Cal is the magic bullet. Please understand that. Cal is the magic bullet. He's just gotta have the right pieces around him that can allow him to be the best version of himself. The rest of us just have to try to find his blind spots and fill them in and help him to be that best version. Because at his best, he is, you know, the best."

Antigua is laughing that big laugh again, like he just spun a red, white and blue basketball on his fingertip, zipped it around a hapless defender's head and then heaved in a half-court hook shot. In his earliest interactions with this Kentucky team, Antigua helped coach youth camps around the state back in the summer and taught several Wildcats a few of his old Globetrotters moves. They were captivated and cackling at the 49-year-old's still-sharp skills. He scored almost 1,000 points and sank 39 percent of his 3-point attempts at Pitt in the early 1990s, and he's still got it.

"I'm here to be positive, to be engaging with the players, obviously use my relationships in recruiting, and just be myself around these kids," Antigua says. "Spend time with our guys, on and off the court, and do all the things that allow the program to thrive. Coach is worried about running the program, so our staff has to be ready to deal with individuals and meet them where they are — and make him aware if there's something he needs to address. That's a huge piece of my job. He's at 30,000 feet. When you're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, which Cal is, there are a lot of moving pieces. Your staff needs to be in tune with all the little things and let him know what he needs to know."

If that sounds like a right-hand man, it is. If that sounds a lot like Payne's old role on the staff, especially after Antigua left,

it's because it was. There's also this: Calipari doesn't have time for coddling or cajoling (or bullshit) in practices. He coaches like a maniac. He pushes the players hard. He frequently plays the part of the bad cop, and that means there is a significant need for a good cop the team trusts. That also used to be Payne. And now?

"That's something that I naturally do anyway," Antigua says. "That's not to say I can't be the bad cop when I need to be. But oftentimes, the job is just to let these kids know that we care for them and we're here for them and that what we're asking from them, when we hold them accountable, it's so they'll be successful and prepared not just in basketball but for life. Sometimes they lose sight of that message because of the delivery, so then it's on us to put an arm around them and explain, 'This is what he's saying.'"

How's that working out? Just listen to the players, past and present, describe Antigua — and his relationship with Calipari. Notice how similar their descriptions sound.

Current point guard Sahvir Wheeler: "Coach O brings the energy every single day. He's an everyday guy. You're going to get the same Coach O, the Coach O who cares about the players first, about our well-being off the court and who holds us accountable on the court."

Former shooting guard Jon Hood (2009-14): "He always brings the energy. A true everyday guy. Never too down, never too high. Always willing to tell it like it is."

Current shooting guard TyTy Washington: "He's been very excited, animated. Every day in practice, before we start, he's the first person to scream. He just wants to get everybody going. We all can tell that he really loves us and loves being here."

Former wing Michael Kidd-Gilchrist (2011-12): "O was always somebody I wanted to learn from, somebody who was easy to talk to and relate to. O always has great advice on life and basketball. He's a special person. I miss playing for those guys."

Current center Oscar Tshiebwe: "Coach Antigua has changed a lot of my game, has given me more confidence in post moves. He pushes me a lot. He pushes me to do better. He's always ringing my phone, calling me all the time, even the moment when you're so tired. He says, 'No, we gotta get shots because you really struggled last game.' I really need him a lot, for everything. He's like my mentor."

Kidd-Gilchrist is a former No. 2 overall NBA Draft pick, by the way. Tshiebwe, painted as a lazy malcontent by West Virginia coach Bob Huggins after he transferred, has already won SEC Player of the Year and the first of six major national

player of the year honors. Just as they did with Payne, these high-level players (and their families) swear by Antigua. Perhaps more importantly, Calipari trusts, respects and leans on him. They balance each other.

Washington says Antigua matches Calipari's intensity "but I would say in a different type of tone." You can tell how close they are, Wheeler says, "because he knows all Coach Cal's jokes (and) it's kind of funny sometimes when he kind of finishes Coach Cal's sentence." When Antigua missed a couple of weeks this season because of COVID-19 protocols, he was sorely missed, players say. "Coach O is definitely what we need," Wheeler says. "Just his energy and that comfort, that blanket of security, knowing if Coach O is there, everything is good."

So maybe the tweets and message-board posts and radio callers were right, after all. Maybe Antigua is the secret sauce. Or at least the big spoon that stirs the pot.

"I think the proof is in the pudding, right?" Kidd-Gilchrist says. "O is a huge, huge part of Cal's success, just like Kenny Payne was. I don't think you can overstate O's success when you just look at how he's gotten player after player after player for that program."

Oh, right, recruiting. Since Antigua arrived, Kentucky has signed the No. 1, 7 and 8 recruits in the Class of 2022. The top prospect in the class, Shaedon Sharpe, graduated high school early and enrolled at UK in January. Whether he ever actually plays for the Wildcats remains a mystery — and intense debate — but the Cats have certainly flexed already on the trail. Fellow assistants Chin Coleman, a strong recruiter who came with Antigua from Illinois, and Jai Lucas share the credit for those victories. But there is no question who carries the most weight with top high school prospects and their families.

The late Tom Konchalski, arguably the most respected high school talent evaluator in history, told the New York Daily News in 2014 that Antigua is "one of the nicest people you will ever meet. He has great crossover ability. He can be with the most prominent alums (of your program) and make them feel comfortable, and he can be with a kid from the inner city and make him feel comfortable." When Calipari brought Antigua back, there was never any direct mention of his desire to get Kentucky back on top of the mountain in recruiting. That didn't need to be said.

"It was understood," says Antigua, who ESPN named the top college assistant under 40 in 2012 and one of the five most feared recruiters in 2013. "He knows who I am. He knows what I bring. It was just, 'OK, let's get to work.' From that point, I really kind of fell right back into the same

role, the same relationship with Cal, kind of bringing levity and jokes when it's needed, but understanding when it's time to be serious about what we need to do for these kids and for recruiting and making sure the staff has that certain synergy that we need to have and the kids need to feel."

These Wildcats, who finished the regular season 25-6 and ranked fifth nationally and who will open play Friday in the SEC tournament, have completely flipped the script on last season. That is in part because Calipari tweaked his approach. Three of Kentucky's starters are transfers: Wheeler (Georgia), Tshiebwe (WVU) and Kellan Grady (Davidson). Four starters — and the team's sixth and seventh men — are at least 21. Washington is the only freshman who starts or plays major minutes, which is of course a significant departure from Calipari's first dozen teams here.

But there are some important ways in which this group is similar to his best squads. The ones Antigua helped Calipari build and lead.

"It was a bond, a commitment, a mentality of servitude for another that those teams had," he remembers. "All of those teams, the underlying drive was that there was a common goal that meant more to everyone than their individual goals. Cal is the best at getting guys to commit to that and understand that and chase that together. And I see that bond in this year's team. I see that caring. I see the commitment to each other, the dedication to the work, the holding each other accountable. That's big, man. That's big. You can go back through all the years and remember Cal talking about how if the team is led by him, there's a limit to how far they can go — but if the kids are leading it, then they take you where they want to get. That's when you have no limit, and I think this team now has no limit."

That, more than the ranch-slathered, bacon-loaded Lexingtonian salad, more than the random strangers bellowing, "Coach O!" around town so often that his fellow assistants playfully mock Antigua's rock-star status, is what really feels like home. The fact that Kentucky is a national title contender again and he's part of it seems just like sliding into a really comfortable pair of expensive shoes.

Kentucky turns up the defense on Florida as Wildcats prepare for SEC tournament

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic
March 5

There were just three objectives for seventh-ranked Kentucky on Saturday in Gainesville: get out of there healthy, reverse its recent defensive dip and walk

away feeling dialed in for the postseason. Florida, which would have punched its NCAA Tournament ticket with an upset victory, was the only team with anything major to gain from the regular-season finale. You could sense that in the way the Gators kept launching frantic rallies to try and close a gap that they never quite could.

Instead, after leading for 39 1/2 minutes and winning 71-63 on the road, John Calipari's Wildcats left the O'Connell Center having nailed their businesslike punch list.

"Do I think we're ready?" junior forward Jacob Toppin said. "Yes, I think we're ready. We're more than prepared. But we're going to use this week to fix any other kinks that we have going on and make sure everyone's back 100 percent healthy."

Kentucky (25-6, 14-4) avoided any new injuries and now gets the almost full week off that comes with a free pass to the SEC quarterfinals. The Cats, who will be the No. 3 seed in Tampa, ended a five-game defensive slide and held Florida under 40 percent shooting from the field. The Gators had their worst 3-point shooting performance (3 of 23) and second-fewest assists (eight) of the season. Two of Kentucky's three starting guards, Sahvir Wheeler and Kellan Grady, played well throughout — combining for 24 points, 11-of-18 shooting, eight assists, three turnovers — and freshman TyTy Washington offset a poor day from the field by dishing five assists and then sinking four straight free throws in the final minute.

Oh, and Oscar Tshiebwe all but locked up the national player of the year with another monster performance: 27 points, 14 rebounds, three steals and two blocks.

"I would be surprised (if Tshiebwe doesn't take home a room full of trophies)," Calipari said. "I've been surprised before, but the things he'd done haven't been done for 50 years. Let me say that again: The things that he's doing haven't been done for 50 years. So how could you not do it?"

To his point: Tshiebwe recorded his 13th consecutive double-double, which is the most by a UK player since at least 1968, when the school started keeping complete single-game rebounding records. It was Tshiebwe's 25th double-double of the season, which is one shy of Dan Issel's school record set in 1970 and just six away from David Robinson's NCAA record set in 1986. Tshiebwe is now averaging 17.3 points and 15.3 rebounds — with 10 different 20-and-10 games — and looks certain to become the first major-conference player to average at least 16 points and 15 rebounds for a season since Bill Walton at UCLA in 1973.

If the goal is peaking in March, it's helpful that the best player in America is playing the best basketball of his career for

Kentucky over the past few games.

"The confidence right now is just at a different level," Tshiebwe said. "Sometimes, I just can't believe what I'm doing, because I never had a dream that I'm doing everything I'm doing now. It is amazing. Sometimes, I think, like, 'How? This is impossible.'"

He said his dream, though, is not to win any individual award but rather to bring the Wildcats their ninth national championship. His objective between now and the start of the NCAA Tournament is to get his teammates to buy in to the same level of commitment he has to that goal.

Kentucky led by 16 points after 13 minutes Saturday and by 12 at halftime. After Florida got within seven early in the second half, Tshiebwe scored 11 consecutive points for the Cats — in the span of 3:24 — and then the margin hovered between 10 and 14 points until the final six minutes of the game.

"We are fighting to make history," Tshiebwe said. "If we get this national championship, they're gonna hang the banner in the gym and they're never gonna forget the people who did that. We're gonna be remembered forever. If you want to see something good happen, you gotta give everything you have. I'm good. I'm ready. I just gotta get my boys to be on the same level with me, a different mind, thinking, 'I'm not letting anybody dominate me. I'm not letting anybody outplay me.'"

Lately, though, Kentucky had slipped significantly in one key area. Through their first blowout win over Florida in Lexington on Feb. 12, the Cats ranked 19th nationally in adjusted defensive efficiency. In the five-game window that followed, however, they ranked 251st in defensive efficiency. In terms of points per possession by the opponent, four of Kentucky's five worst performances of the season had come in the past three weeks.

You could dismiss some of that as the result of Wheeler and Washington sitting out two games and then working off the rust after their return. But that doesn't completely absolve the others.

"We've had some lapses with scouting and being assignment-sound," Grady said on the eve of the trip to Florida. "Those are definitely things that we've addressed and we've got to clean up. I think more than anything, there's a tad of discipline we've lacked, whether that's meant getting over a screen a certain way to avoid giving up an open shot to a capable shot-maker or rotating a certain way on defense. There's just been a few lapses each game where I think you take away four or five baskets and we'd be having a different conversation now. But I think we've showed all year that we've been pretty good on defense, so we've just

got to tighten up on a couple things."

The Cats backed that up Saturday. With a minute to go in the game, before UK gave up three quick-strike layups trying not to foul with a comfortable lead, Florida was shooting just 37 percent from the field. The Gators finished with their lowest offensive efficiency rating since the first meeting with Kentucky — which capped a six-game winning streak in which the Wildcats held all of their opponents under a point per possession — and UF's effective field goal percentage (.434) was the lowest by an opponent in the past eight games.

"I thought we really guarded," Calipari said. "I thought we did better. Now, the pick-and-roll defense wasn't great, but we're working on it. What I told them was, look, we're a machine. It's not about emotion. It's not about me being a cheerleader. It's about us locking in and playing with a spirit and a toughness and an energy for 40 minutes — and playing for each other for 40 minutes."

Calipari had challenged Toppin to defend better when he switches onto guards, and despite an off game on the other end, he delivered on D. Florida shot just 14 of 38 (36.8 percent), and Kentucky outscored Florida by 17 points in the 26 minutes he was on the floor.

"They've been talking so much about defense," Toppin said, "and we've all established that we need to get back to playing better defense. I think we did that today. We still have some little things that we need to fix, but overall, I think we got back to how we usually are defensively."

The Wildcats jumped back up to No. 2 overall in Ken Pomeroy's rankings with the win, their seventh away from home. They're No. 3 in adjusted offense and back to No. 25 in adjusted defense. They've won 25 games for the 11th time in 13 seasons under Calipari. Of the previous 10 teams to do that, seven made the Elite Eight and four reached the Final Four. Another lost in the Sweet 16 and the 2020 team didn't get a postseason because of COVID-19.

Which is to say, Calipari knows what a team that's ready for March looks like. This one?

"You have, in huddles, guys speaking up, not afraid, talking to each other, talking to me," he said. "Am I ready to just sit down and watch them? I think I gotta help them a little bit still, but it's not where we were at the beginning of the year. They get it. And I got a really smart team."

John Calipari Breaks His Dependence on Freshmen—and Kentucky Is on the Rise

By Laine Higgins | The Wall Street Journal
March 3

John Calipari vaulted Kentucky to the top of college basketball with a steady stream of one-and-done players who barely had enough time to complete their intro-level courses before taking off for the NBA.

But even Calipari has his limits.

In an unusual turn for Kentucky, which normally boasts one of the youngest teams in the NCAA, the average age on this year's roster is above the legal drinking limit. The best player is a junior, Oscar Tshiebwe. And for the first time in Calipari's 13 seasons in Lexington, Ky., there are more upperclassmen than freshmen.

"We knew we had to change the roster," Calipari said this week. He's come to realize that many teenagers have outsized views of their abilities. He said they think, "I did it at the Nike Camp, why can't I do it here?"

The Wildcats' veteran core is a big reason why they have a 25-6 record in the surprisingly deep Southeastern Conference, with a good shot at making a run in the NCAA tournament. Kentucky will finish its regular season at Florida on Saturday.

"I think it's been fun for us to coach a team with experience," assistant coach Chin Coleman said. "We have a really good balance in our class structure."

Calipari added that the more grounded perspectives of his older players help keep younger egos in check. "These kids went through everything. They're not delusional about anything."

After arriving in 2009, Calipari cemented Kentucky's blue blood status with a novel model for roster building that was made possible by an NBA rule change. Beginning with the 2006 draft, the league raised the minimum age to 19, effectively requiring the most talented high-schoolers to enroll in at least one year of college before going pro.

"I've coached older teams before," Calipari insisted. "It just hasn't been in the last 13 years because of the rule changes and the way everything was going."

Kentucky aggressively went after the brightest high school stars. It was a bet that talent would outweigh team chemistry, as he strategy sacrificed roster continuity for star power.

"I'm taking talent. I've said that from day one," Calipari said.

It usually worked: Kentucky advanced to four Final Fours over five seasons, won it all in 2012 with a freshman named Anthony Davis and lost in the title game in 2014. During the 2014-15 season, then-freshmen

Devin Booker and Karl-Anthony Towns helped Kentucky become the 19th college basketball team ever to go undefeated in the regular season. The Wildcats lost in the Final Four to Wisconsin that year.

After that season, Calipari doubled down on one-and-done players. Prior to 2014-15, he recruited between four and six freshmen in all but one season.

After 2015, Calipari signed no less than seven freshmen in each of the following six seasons. It was another notable shift toward youth in a program in a sport with just 13 scholarships to divvy up.

The youth movement has so far yielded mixed results. Kentucky has had more NBA draft picks (24) and lottery picks (12) than any other school since 2015, but the Wildcats have advanced no further than the Elite Eight round of March Madness. Things got downright miserable last season, as Kentucky limped along to a 9-16 finish and missed the NCAA tournament altogether.

That team had eight freshmen, five sophomores and three upperclassmen. Thanks to the NBA draft, the transfer portal and tragedy—19-year-old Terrence Clarke died in a car accident last April—Calipari overhauled his team with an eye toward experience.

The 2021-22 Wildcats have nine upperclassmen; Calipari has never coached more than five in a season before at Kentucky. There's a six-year age gap between Kellan Grady, the 24-year-old grad student, and freshman Shaedon Sharp, who is 18.

Most of these veterans weren't originally recruited by Kentucky. Only three of the team's seven juniors started their careers with the Wildcats; The other four trickled in via the transfer portal between the summer of 2019 and last fall, including Tshiebwe. Some of those players know the benefits of having played alongside the same group of players for several years.

"When you're rallying with somebody, that guy beside you has probably been your roommate for three years already.... I've probably had lunch, met this guy's family, been with them for three years and we've eaten over 100 times together," said Davion Mintz, a grad transfer who came to Kentucky from Creighton and is using the extra year of eligibility the NCAA granted all athletes during the pandemic to play another year. At Kentucky, he added, "It's completely different."

Nevertheless, Mintz said this season's team is the closest he's been on in his 23 years. The players spend nearly all of their free time together, aided by the fact that they all live in Kentucky's "Wildcat Coal Lodge," a luxe dorm built exclusively for the men's basketball team.

"Coach Cal is the master," Coleman said. "Let's be clear: He's won at a high level in

college basketball with having turnover every year and bringing in new guys every year."

The difference this year is that this mix of players came with a deeper wealth of basketball knowledge.

"This is a smart group, not just because this is a more veteran group, but our freshmen are really dialed in and have a lot of cerebral basketball knowledge themselves," Coleman said.

The Wildcats are not without freshmen talent; when healthy, freshman TyTy Washington Jr. is the team's third most prolific scorer with 12.4 points per game. But the biggest star of this Kentucky team by far is Tshiebwe, a junior. A 6-foot 9-inch rebounding machine, Tshiebwe leads the nation in offensive and total boards by a wide margin (he's ranked second in defensive rebounds) and is a front-runner to win National Player of the Year.

Experienced basketball teams tend to go far in March—the last team to win the NCAA tournament with a roster filled with one-and-done players was Duke in 2015. Baylor, last year's champions, won with a grizzled starting five and an average team age of 20.8 years.

Calipari might never admit that winning it all with talented 18-year-olds is impossible, but he didn't argue with the fact that experience helps.

"If you can get both, that's what you want," Calipari said. "And we have that."

Could next season's Kentucky basketball senior night include Oscar Tshiebwe?

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal
March 2

Often during the John Calipari era it has felt like Kentucky basketball's senior night festivities are burying the lead.

With so few scholarship players sticking around for four years, senior night generally is a time to recognize little-used walk-ons. In recent years, graduate transfers who spent just one year in the program, have been added to the festivities. By that standard, the ceremony before Kentucky's 83-72 senior night win over Ole Miss Tuesday was actually noteworthy because it included one two-year player (Davion Mintz) alongside the normal graduate transfer (Kellan Grady).

More meaningful for 20,000 fans in Rupp Arena than the senior walk-on recognized on most recent UK senior nights has been the freshman star surrendering his normal starting spot. The assumption is the one-and-done star is also playing his final home game as a Wildcat with no ceremony to show for it.

The real mystery surrounds the group

of borderline NBA draft prospects who might be leaving school too, but the safest bet has been to assume most of the key rotation players will not play in Rupp Arena gain.

In previous years it would have been easy to make those same assumptions about the current Wildcats.

Oscar Tshiebwe? Even though he is a projected second-round pick, surely he is gone because he has already reached his ceiling as a draft prospect. Sahvir Wheeler? He's not getting any taller, so surely he will cash in on whatever professional chances he has now. Keion Brooks? Three years is already longer than most scholarship players wear a Kentucky jersey these days, so better assume he is gone too.

Except, the landscape of college sports dramatically changed last summer with athletes cleared to profit off their name, image and likeness. And the normal exodus of Kentucky players might have changed with it.

"My comment would be the kids that have made mistakes leaving early because of it will stay," Calipari testified before a Kentucky Senate committee considering a NIL bill last month. "Now, if someone is a No. 1 draft pick is what I probably would say to him is if you want to do what's right for you and your family, you probably should go. If you want to do what's right for me and my family, you probably should stay.

"...Maybe a young man that could be drafted in the top 10 and he says, 'I'm not ready, but I have to go.' Now it's, no you don't. No you don't. Make the right decision for your career. I believe the ones it needs to help, needs to help make a decision, it will."

Among the Wildcats who played for Kentucky Tuesday, Mintz and Grady are definitely gone as they already used the extra year of eligibility granted all players due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Freshman guard TyTy Washington, a possible top-10 pick in the 2022 NBA draft, is a lock to leave as well.

Beyond that trio, nothing is certain.

"I think (NIL) has been a really big change in the decision-making process moving forward," Mintz said earlier this week. "The world moves financially. That's what makes it circulate. I think depending on a player's situation and depending on what his professional career looks like at the moment, if he can be able to discuss NIL and figure out what would put me and my family in a better financial situation if I leave or go, that definitely will make a difference if a player stays or not."

Of the remaining Wildcats, freshman Shaedon Sharpe (No. 8), who enrolled in January with the plan of only practicing

this season, and Tshiebwe (No. 43) were included in ESPN's most recent 2023 NBA mock draft. Even those players might not be locks to leave in the era of NIL with Sharpe's advisors insisting the plan remains for him to play at Kentucky next season and Tshiebwe perhaps having the largest earning potential of any college basketball player in the country as a beloved returning National Player of the Year.

A native of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tshiebwe only recently was cleared to begin earning NIL money due to student visa issues.

UK coaches have done little to hide their enthusiasm about a possible Tshiebwe return to school since that announcement.

"I think what we can continue to add to his game if we're fortunate enough to get him back," UK associate coach Orlando Antigua said. "There's a lot. There's a lot to add to him. There's a lot to his ball-handling, his passing. And obviously he can continue to extend his range in terms of his shooting."

No other Kentucky player is projected to be drafted this year, but that has not stopped a growing number of Wildcats from leaving school anyway in recent years.

Ashton Hagans and EJ Montgomery could have been seniors recognized Tuesday, but they left UK after their sophomore seasons despite not being projected as draft picks. Hagans now plays in the NBA's G League. Montgomery is playing in Hungary.

As Calipari welcomes another group of highly touted freshmen and transfers to campus, many of the current role players will also face transfer decisions with most players now allowed transfer once without sitting out a year. NIL could factor in those decisions too as earning potential is greater at Kentucky even with minutes perhaps more readily available elsewhere.

"Honestly, it's what's best for that player," Mintz said. "Sometimes, it may not be the money for certain people. Sometimes it's about your peace and your happiness within yourself. It will definitely make a difference though."

NIL certainly won't keep all the borderline draft prospects in Lexington this summer. There will be departures as normal.

But for once, senior night Tuesday might end up actually being mostly a goodbye to the actual seniors. And if NIL has the effect UK hopes, there could be at least four scholarship seniors honored next season.

'It's been the best decision of my life': Davion Mintz reflects on returning to Kentucky during senior night celebration

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | March 1

Moments before he joined his son on the floor at Rupp Arena, Sean Mintz bowed his head, closed his eyes and nodded along as the crowd of some 20,000 fans sang the national anthem together. On his senior night do-over, Davion Mintz was about to bust through a giant paper circle with his face on it and be celebrated with a roar from the Kentucky faithful that had been a long time coming.

"I was just overjoyed about this whole journey that we've been on with him," Sean Mintz said. "It's been long, it's been challenging, it's been fun, it's been exciting. I just wanted to take a minute and thank God for seeing us through. And then it was just enjoying that feeling of what it's like to stand on that court and look up there in the stands and see all those fans and hear them cheering for your son."

The first time Mintz might've had a senior night, at Creighton in 2020, he was in a walking boot, having missed the season with nagging injuries. His second crack at senior night, at Kentucky in 2021, came at the end of the Wildcats' worst season in almost a century — and the stands were nearly empty, his parents banished to the bleachers due to COVID-19 protocols. Finally, wrapping up his sixth and final season of college basketball, Mintz got a proper send-off Tuesday night.

A full house howled in appreciation for all he's done these past two years, first as the leader of a lost season and then as the super sub on this revamped national championship contender. As the ovation washed over them, before the traditional singing of "My Old Kentucky Home," Sean wrapped Davion in a bear hug. Father and son held on to each other for a few extra beats to savor the moment. They exchanged I-love-you and acknowledged a dream being realized: This is why he came back, to get the real Kentucky basketball experience.

"I've certainly gotten it this year," Mintz said. "Just looking back from last year to this year, we've come a long way and I've just seen what the heart of this place is, really. Seeing this place filled up, it's been great. It's been the best decision of my life."

Mintz could've gotten on with his pursuit of a professional career after last season, when he led a losing team in minutes, points, assists and made 3-pointers. But he wanted to win in a Kentucky uniform. He wanted to do it in front of a crowd. He wanted to hear the roar that was conspicuously absent when he hit what few clutch

shots there were for the Wildcats a season ago. He heard it Tuesday night, when he knocked down a transition 3 from the left wing and held his follow-through for effect. It was his eighth point on just four shots in the first half and put UK ahead of Ole Miss by 13 with 3:22 to go before intermission.

This is the kind of performance that has John Calipari campaigning for him to win the SEC's Sixth Man of the Year. When that shot dropped, Sean Mintz stood up from his second-row seat and saluted his son as the crowd made a thunderous noise.

"Oh my God, I don't really have words for it," the father said. "It's unparalleled. Tonight felt like we were really a part of this place. Tonight felt like a real senior night. This felt right. I can't imagine what he must've been feeling out there. But you know, the most amazing thing is that they've loved him here not only through the good times. They've loved him here through the hard times. I think Davion has that gift that people like him, but it's also because this is a fan base that is committed to this program. Look around you. And they respect players who commit to it just as deeply. They're the best fans in the country, and I think it says something about my son that they love him."

That's what Tuesday night was really about, celebrating that ethos, more than the ho-hum, 83-72 victory over the Rebels, who trailed for 38 ½ minutes and by double digits for most of that. Kentucky is now 24-6 overall, 13-4 in SEC play, ranked seventh nationally heading into the final weekend of the regular season. It has enjoyed a complete reversal of fortune from last season, and no one appreciates that more than Mintz. No one appreciates Mintz more than 16-year-old Makenna Lunsford.

A lifelong Kentucky fan who lives in Topeka, Kan., she attended the Cats' blowout victory over the Jayhawks at Allen Fieldhouse in January. Mintz did not score a point in that game, but Lunsford didn't care. He's her favorite player because of all he's endured, including the humbling shift from starter on a bad team to reserve on a good one. She's had two high school soccer seasons derailed by injuries — and major surgeries — to both her hips. Mintz's resilience has helped her reach down and discover her own. So when she found herself in the hallway outside Kentucky's locker room at Kansas, Lunsford jumped at the chance to tell Mintz how much he means to her. Sort of. At first, she mostly sobbed uncontrollably.

"I thought she was going to pass out," her mother, Wendy, said. "Davion was like, 'Hey, are you OK?' Davion's dad was like, 'Is she ... crying?' He said, 'I've never seen anyone cry over my son.' But they just had

this instant connection as she just let it all out. He put his arm around her and she told him how much his fight has helped her fight. The way he's opened up about the mental health part of COVID, she really related to that because of all she's missed out on in the last two years. I think she just felt drawn to him. To watch him handle all his struggles with such grace and just be so relatable, it really touched her heart."

Mintz, by the way, decided not to bring his emotional support dog, Ghost, to senior night, because he feared it would be a distraction. But his French Bulldog did have a bow tie picked out for the occasion. Style runs in the family, as Sean Mintz was dapper in a suit and pink bow tie Tuesday night. Davion will need something similar at the end of April, when he is planning to attend the high school prom with Lunsford. They've stayed in touch through social media since meeting in Kansas, and she decided to "shoot her shot" and ask him to the big dance after the Big Dance. She has picked out a Kentucky blue sequined dress.

Makenna and her mom attended the Florida game at Rupp Arena as Mintz's guests. They sat with his parents.

"I'm blown away by it," Sean Mintz said. "She just put it all out there that night, like she'd been waiting to meet him and there was something inside her that she needed to release. And after that game, of course, there was something Davion needed to release. He had zero points. He wasn't feeling great about himself. He was so honored by the fact that someone showed up in that moment to tell him how much she adored him and looked up to him. I think they both blessed each other in that moment."

Mintz followed his goose egg at Kansas with a season-high 21 points the next game against Vanderbilt. He's averaging 8.7 points and shooting 35.4 percent from 3-point range this season. Tuesday marked just his sixth start of the season but the 106th of his college career. There is no doubt that if the Cats make a deep run in the NCAA Tournament later this month, the 23-year-old Mintz will play a key role.

Even if it isn't the one he imagined, it's one he now relishes.

"I learned a lot and I found myself within it," he said. "You go on this life journey and sometimes you get so caught up and think everything is about you. You learn that when you can do stuff to impact other people, you'll be impacted more. That's kind of what I learned this year. It was the greatest thing that happened to me, because I really found myself and I started to fall in love with my role."

His mother, Sandy, had tears in her eyes after the final home game of her son's career Tuesday. She'd heard the Rupp crowd roar for him before it, during it, as he

checked out in the final minutes and again when he took the microphone and thanked them postgame.

"It's like he's come full-circle," she said. "It just makes me feel proud that people appreciate what he did here. And it's not just in the arena. Everywhere we go here, people are talking about him and thankful that he decided to come back. That played a huge role in his decision, that he didn't want to leave on a bad note, that he wanted to give the fans more and get more for himself. He wanted to give it another run, do what he came here for, and chase a championship."

The reward so far: What Mintz calls the best brotherhood of his life on the best team of his career. As for the legacy he hopes to have left by embracing a second season at Kentucky?

"I want to be known as the guy who tried to give his all no matter what happened," Mintz said. "That guy you knew was always going to go out there and fight. A guy who would sacrifice everything for his team. And then leave as a winner. When you see my name and put it beside Kentucky, I want people to say, 'This guy won and he fought every night and he represented this place the way we want it to be represented.'"

When Sean Mintz closed his eyes Tuesday night, he could hear it. That mission is already accomplished.

Oscar Tshiebwe's performance at Arkansas POY worthy

By Aaron Gershon | The Cats Pause
Feb. 27

Playing in front of one of the most hostile environments in all of college basketball and his team down by as many as 13 early, Oscar Tshiebwe did what any player considered for national player of the year honors needs to do: put the team on his back.

"He came in the huddle and said, 'Look, the guy can't guard me,'" UK coach John Calipari said. "And he doesn't say anything. How about this, doesn't say a word to the officials, doesn't. He just plays."

Tshiebwe scored Kentucky's first nine points and finished the first half, having already recorded his 23rd double-double with 14 points and 12 assists. He added two assists and picked up a key steal that turned into a fast-break bucket on the other end for his team. He finished with 30 points and 18 rebounds.

"After I saw the start of the game I said, 'We're throwing it to Oscar every single time we can. If you're timid and you don't want to do stuff, throw it to him.' That's what we did," Calipari said.

Kentucky trailed by 10 or multiple times

in the half, which included trailing 32-19 with 4:11 left in the half.

"They were making shots at the beginning of the game and we struggled a little bit," Tshiebwe said. "They were running really good."

Instead of trailing by double figures heading into halftime despite its backcourt, which included TyTy Washington and Sahvir Wheeler, back from injury, shooting just 2-for-14 from the field, Tshiebwe's efforts helped bring his team within striking distance as Arkansas took a six-point 34-28 lead into the half.

The momentum Tshiebwe helped generate late in the first half carried over early in the second as he scored four points during a 13-6 run to put Kentucky up 41-40 at the first media timeout.

Throughout the second half, Tshiebwe continued to keep his team in the game as they led by as many as four with 9:35 to play, but Arkansas led by star senior JD Notae, who scored 30 points on the night wouldn't go away quietly.

Arkansas would lead by four with 6:20 left to play, but a Wheeler 3 and Tshiebwe put back put Kentucky back on top shortly after.

The remainder of the game saw both teams exchange punches. In the final five minutes, Tshiebwe added four more points and three rebounds.

Despite his best effort, the Arkansas crowd that caused Bud Walton Arena to shake at numerous times throughout the night helped propel the Hogs to a 75-73 win on its home floor, where they've now beaten Kentucky, Auburn and Tennessee this season.

Tshiebwe's final line saw him score 30 points. He also had 30 points on Jan. 11 at Vanderbilt, a career high.

"He's playing for his teammates and the stuff that he's doing and the way he's shooting the ball, even passing the ball better we gotta have some other guys play," Calipari said.

"We had two rusty's and had a couple of guys who didn't play very well and we still had our chances to win. We could've won the game anyway."

Kentucky expected Arkansas to double-team Tshiebwe, but they never did, enabling Tshiebwe to exploit the Razorback defense.

"Every time we game plan for someone to double team Oscar, they never do and he hits 30 and 16 or whatever he had," Sahvir Wheeler said postgame.

Arkansas coach Eric Musselman called Tshiebwe a "monster" after the game, saying, "He's probably the best duck-in guy ... he's probably the best big that we've coached against at establishing post position in the paint."

Musselman's praise comes just two weeks after Arkansas faced 7-foot-1 Auburn forward Walker Kessler, who is also considered among the best bigs in the nation and scored 16 points and grabbed 19 rebounds against the Razorbacks in that matchup.

While Kentucky did not get the win, Tshiebwe, whose been consistently brilliant throughout the year, showed why he should be on a shortlist of national player of the year finalists.

The national player of the year is the equivalent of what pro leagues call the "most valuable player" award.

One would be hard-pressed to find a player that was more valuable than one who scored 30 points, grab 18 rebounds, bring his team back from a 13-point deficit and nearly win a game in a shaking arena.

'Everything we prayed for tonight came true': The Bryce Hopkins Game delights Hopkins' father

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic
Feb. 24

Anyone who was at Rupp Arena on Wednesday night will surely have no trouble remembering it. *Oh, that was The Bryce Hopkins Game.* Wait, what? Yes, it's true, Kentucky erased another double-digit deficit to win a game without two starting guards, thanks to yet another stunning breakout performance by someone at the end of John Calipari's bench. Kentucky 71, LSU 66.

Hopkins, a 6-foot-6 freshman wing, had not scored a point since Jan. 25, almost a full month, and had produced a total of just 10 points in the Wildcats' first 14 SEC games. He'd played six minutes in the previous six games combined. So when Kentucky spotted LSU an 11-point lead on Wednesday, just as it let Alabama race ahead by 13 on Saturday, with no TyTy Washington (ankle) or Sahvir Wheeler (wrist) to rescue a floundering offense, Hopkins was not just an unlikely hero. He was an unimaginable one.

But then there he was, to everyone's shock and delight, getting buckets when no one else could. Hopkins scored nine points in 93 seconds early in the second half against the Tigers, including an offensive board and three-point play to push Kentucky ahead for good with 15:33 to go. In all, Hopkins made five of his six shots, scored 13 points and grabbed four rebounds in 16 minutes Wednesday. The Cats outscored LSU by 16 with him on the floor, and the team's next-best plus/minus was half that. Like Kellan Grady four days earlier, Hopkins electrified the crowd at Rupp and changed the entire energy in the building with his barrage. The place roared

for him.

In the stands, his father, Clyde, was overcome with emotion. Other players' families hugged and high-fived him. C.J. Fredrick's parents, Davion Mintz's and Keion Brooks' brothers. The ushers and security personnel and random fans who could tell by the joy whose kid was his.

"Oh, man, it was unbelievable," Clyde said. "I've just been keeping the kid's confidence up, going over there on their days off, shooting with him and talking to him and just telling him to stay confident, stay coachable, be a great teammate. I've been saying, 'You're on a great team, but your time will come too.' So I'm just at a loss for words, I'm so happy for the kid to finally get his opportunity and do what he did with it. It was surreal to see. And to hear that place erupt like that — for him, because he was giving them the spark they needed — whew, that was special. And I can tell you he's on Cloud Nine."

Most years, a guy like Hopkins would've played a lot more by now for Kentucky. He was a consensus top-40 recruit from Oak Park, Ill., where he averaged 24.4 points and 12.5 rebounds as a high school senior, earning invites to the prestigious Jordan Brand and Iverson all-star games. He was even the talk of preseason practice in Lexington, where there was some early buzz that he might be the best player on this team. Yes, really.

But this is an unusual Calipari roster, for once loaded with quality veterans. Two super seniors and four juniors among the top seven players in the rotation, Washington the only freshman getting major minutes. This was a rare bad year to be young at Kentucky — even worse to halt all that summer momentum with a back injury Hopkins suffered doing power cleans during his introduction to a college strength and conditioning program. That stunted his development.

"Once you fall down that ladder, it's tough at this level to regain your spot," his father said. "Especially when everyone else is playing so well. This team is so, so deep, everybody is just waiting for their number to be called. There are great players on the end of the bench who could go off any night, but I think that's what makes this group really special, and I'm just so proud of all of them. I'm so happy for my son to be a part of this. They're a brotherhood, and I know Bryce was thrilled to really be a part of it this time, to really impact the game."

It's hard for talented young guys to be patient. Five-star freshman forward Daimion Collins' high-water mark in conference play was 10 points and six boards in nine (also really surprising) minutes at Alabama two weeks ago. He'd scored just

two points in the preceding month. But Calipari believes he will — or at least could, the way injuries keep piling up — need those guys come March, and he's been desperate to keep them engaged. Which is why he recently showed the team a speech from Alabama football coach Nick Saban about how backups must prepare for their big break or risk wasting it when the time comes.

"Basically what he said is that you have guys that are results-driven" and don't appreciate the value of the process, Calipari said. "You missed out on the grind. You didn't learn all the stuff you have to learn to really reach your potential. Every one of you at some point in your career will be in this boat, that you're not playing as much as you think (you should), not getting the shots you think (you should), so now you don't work. And then you get an opportunity and you don't take advantage."

Hopkins might've moped some early on, "fought it," as Calipari put it, but he didn't stay down in the dumps. His father, a former player at Tennessee Tech and star at Division III Illinois Benedictine College, moved to Lexington for the season and has worked diligently to keep Bryce's spirits high. They talk on the phone a few minutes before every game, and Clyde prays for his son and the team. With Washington and Wheeler out again Wednesday, Hopkins and his father both knew this was a chance to shine.

"After the game, I told him, 'Man, look, everything we prayed for tonight came true. Everything,'" Clyde said. "For him to have that coming-out party and pull out such a great win, it was just wonderful."

The best part, everyone seems to agree, was watching the way Hopkins' teammates swarmed him to celebrate his breakthrough. Jacob Toppin in particular, another guy who just keeps carving out a bigger and bigger role for himself, bear-hugged Hopkins after two of his biggest shots of the night. The bench went crazy every time Hopkins scored. Afterward, national player of the year candidate Oscar Tshiebwe, who had a standard 17-point, 16-rebound performance, beamed about Hopkins.

"I'm so proud of Bryce. He don't even know how much we are proud of him," Tshiebwe said. "Bryce was unstoppable in the summer, (and) what we saw from him tonight, that's the Bryce we need."

Hopkins said his teammates supported him long before now, always reminding him to keep his head up and keep working. One of Mintz's favorite lines stuck with him: It can't rain forever; the sun has to shine someday. When the clouds finally rolled away Wednesday, his fellow Wildcats were there to celebrate the occasion.

"Those are my brothers," Hopkins said. "Just for them to embrace me like that when I was doing good, it felt really good to me. I'm glad they're my brothers and I can't wait to keep going to war for them this postseason."

Calipari said it plainly: Kentucky is going to need Hopkins again at some point if these Cats are going to make a deep NCAA Tournament run. They might even need him again soon, like Saturday at 18th-ranked Arkansas, which has won 12 of its last 13 games. Wheeler and Washington might sit out again, in which case it'll be all hands on deck to try to steal a win at rowdy Bud Walton Arena. Whatever happens there, the sixth-ranked Wildcats (23-5, 12-3 SEC) have already demonstrated a critical championship characteristic.

"A good team has good players," Calipari said. "A great team has great teammates. These guys are terrific teammates. That gives us a chance. And we are talented, but when you're great teammates, people watch the game and you know what they say? 'Man, are they fun to watch. Man, do they cover for each other. They make the game easy. Look how hard they play and fight for each other.'"

Years from now, maybe The Bryce Hopkins Game will be a tiny footnote in history. Or maybe it'll be part of the story Kentucky fans retell in perpetuity about what made the program's ninth NCAA title team so unbeatable.

Should John Calipari be getting more buzz in National Coach of the Year discussion?

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal Feb. 20

In the first 12 years of his Kentucky basketball career, Hall of Famer John Calipari coached a national champion, four Final Four teams and one squad that won its first 38 games.

But the current Wildcats might represent Calipari's best UK coaching job yet.

Coming off one of the worst seasons in program history, Calipari's squad looks like one of a handful of favorites to reach the Final Four in New Orleans, 10 years after Kentucky won its last national championship there. Just when it looked like injuries might derail this team's momentum after a 13-point loss at Tennessee, Kentucky responded with one of its most impressive performances of the season in Saturday's 90-81 win over Alabama.

Starting guards TyTy Washington (leg) and Sahvir Wheeler (wrist) watched the entire game from the bench in street clothes. Kentucky fell behind by 13 points in the first half as Alabama got off to a scorching start by making 9 of 12 3s.

But Kentucky still rallied. It still won. It still left Rupp Arena with more evidence the NCAA Tournament selection committee's decision to slot the Wildcats as a No. 2 seed in the early bracket reveal earlier Saturday was too low.

"I keep saying, I like my team," Calipari said. "There are good teams out there, but I'm taking this one."

Perhaps in a rush to move past the misery of two years of the COVID-19 pandemic we have been too quick to take a moment to recognize just how dramatic Kentucky's turnaround has been this season.

For as much as Calipari wants to refer to the 2020-21 Wildcats' 9-16 record as an aberration, it was no sure thing the program would immediately return to national prominence after the struggles of a year ago.

Calipari remade his staff, hiring two new assistant coaches, and embraced the transfer portal after missing on several top targets in the 2021 high school class. He ended up with a roster heavy on experience with just the perfect mix of personalities to build into a winner.

In the portal, Calipari landed the leading candidate for National Player of the Year, the SEC's leader in assists and one of the best 3-point shooters in the country. Losing star point guard commitment Nolan Hickman to Gonzaga late in the 2021 recruiting cycle could have been a crippling blow to the roster, but Calipari replaced him with TyTy Washington, now the best freshman guard in the country.

"Every day I go to practice I enjoy myself," Calipari said.

Even after constructing a roster particularly poised to thrive in a college basketball environment that has rewarded experience above all else in recent years, Calipari had more roadblocks to clear.

Five of Kentucky's seven primary rotation pieces have missed at least one game due to injury or illness. For much of the season there was a feeling of "what if" as the Wildcats just missed marquee wins at LSU and Auburn with Washington and Wheeler sidelined for long stretches of both games.

Even after the home blowout of Tennessee and road demolition of Kansas, there were questions about Kentucky's depth. With Washington limited to just 13 ineffective minutes at Tennessee Tuesday due to a lower leg injury, Kentucky looked mortal again.

Calipari himself had admitted a week ago that his team had proven it could account for the loss of Washington or Wheeler, but not both. So when it became apparent the two guards would not play against Alabama, the narrative of another injury-fueled "what if" was readily avail-

able.

Someone forgot to tell Calipari and company to follow the script though.

“(Calipari) just wants to war with the guys that will fight,” said super senior guard Kellan Grady, who scored a season-high 25 points against Alabama. “He reminded us: ‘At the end of the day, I need five guys.’ And he says to us sometimes, ‘I believe in some of you guys more than you believe in yourself.’ Some guys struggled and he stuck with guys and really challenged them and forced them to rise to the occasion, and guys did.”

“And in my experience in college, this is probably one of the most rewarding wins I’ve ever been a part of, just knowing what we were up against.”

On Friday, Calipari was announced as one of 15 coaches on the watch list for the Naismith Coach of the Year, but he has thus far received little buzz as a legitimate candidate for the national award.

Seven different coaches received at least one first place vote in The Athletic’s midseason national awards, as voted on by the website’s reporters, in late January. None were Calipari.

Even within the Southeastern Conference, Calipari faces an uphill climb for Coach of the Year honors considering Bruce Pearl has an Auburn team picked to finished fifth in the preseason media poll in first place. Despite its abysmal record last season, Kentucky was picked as the SEC preseason favorite again.

High expectations are nothing new at Kentucky, but meeting them does not mean Calipari’s coaching job this season is any less noteworthy.

For UK basketball fans, the big worry for March Madness is now clear

By Mark Story | Lexington Herald Leader Feb. 17

You have to go back to Dec. 12 to find the last time Kentucky lost a men’s basketball game with the top seven players on its roster available for the entire contest.

Since falling 66-62 at Notre Dame in December, John Calipari’s No. 4 Wildcats (21-5, 10-3 SEC) have lost only three times — all on the road vs. ranked SEC opponents.

In each of those defeats, the Wildcats were compromised by in-game injuries.

During UK’s 65-60 loss at then-No. 21 LSU on Jan. 4, the Wildcats lost starting point guard Sahvir Wheeler after four minutes to a neck injury. The Cats also did not have their other primary ball handler, freshman star TyTy Washington, down the stretch of that game due to cramping.

When Kentucky fell 80-71 at No. 2 Auburn on Jan. 22, an ankle injury sidelined

Washington after only nine minutes — and with UK up nine points.

And when the Wildcats were dismantled 76-63 Tuesday night by No. 16 Tennessee in Knoxville, Washington was again limited to 13 minutes of court time by an ankle injury he had originally suffered in the preceding game vs. Florida.

If that weren’t enough concern for UK backers, Wheeler appeared to end the UT game holding his wrist. Afterward, Kentucky Coach John Calipari said he did not know the nature of any injury potentially suffered by Wheeler.

Meanwhile, Calipari second-guessed his decision to play Washington at all. “If I had to do it over, I would not have played TyTy — I shouldn’t have played him,” Calipari said.

Based on how things have gone for Kentucky in SEC play, the big question facing the Wildcats as the 2022 NCAA Tournament nears is whether they can keep the seven players atop their playing rotation healthy long enough to make a deep run.

So far this season in Southeastern Conference action, Kentucky has had the top seven players in Calipari’s playing rotation available for complete games only five times out of 13 contests.

After his neck injury, Wheeler missed full games vs. Georgia and at Vanderbilt.

His first ankle malady knocked Washington out of the Mississippi State game.

An ankle injury suffered at South Carolina limited key front-court reserve Jacob Toppin to six minutes in that game and kept him out of the following contest vs. Florida.

Put it all together, and UK has not had its full complement of players available for entire games for more than three straight contests at any point in SEC play.

You will note, it still takes six-consecutive victories (or seven starting from the First Four) to win the NCAA championship.

Guys, obviously, are not trying to get hurt, so Kentucky’s primary problem this year is not anyone’s fault. Nevertheless, as we look ahead to March Madness, the injury-filled nature of the UK season should be concerning for Cats backers on two different planes.

Part of what has made the 2021-22 Cats one of the more enjoyable teams of the Calipari era is that the whole is greater than the parts.

The vulnerability for a team with such highly defined roles is that any subtraction from the core players can serve to undermine the rest of the unit.

As we saw Tuesday night at Tennessee, when Washington is sidelined, Kentucky lacks a player who can consistently create their own shot against tight defensive pressure.

That can put stress on Wheeler to have “to try to do too much” and also makes it easier for defenders to lock down UK’s designated three-point threat, Kellan Grady.

The other concern is that “the book” on defending Kentucky has become play the Wildcats as physically as the officiating will allow.

After UK obliterated Kansas 80-62 in Allen Fieldhouse in an up-tempo, free-flowing game late last month, coaches figured out that allowing Kentucky freedom of movement was a recipe for getting embarrassed.

Starting with Jerry Stackhouse and Vanderbilt in the ensuing game, the plan against UK has subsequently been to deploy muscle against the Cats.

Tennessee was especially effective with that approach Tuesday night, the Volunteers’ guards pushing Kentucky well out of its offensive comfort zone.

The big-picture downside for Kentucky in the way opponents have chosen to defend the Wildcats is that a steady succession of ultra-physical games would seem to heighten the risks of injury for a UK team that has already proven brittle.

Now, if you are an optimist, your hope is that UK is getting its full season’s allotment of injuries out of the way early and is due a period of protracted health down the stretch.

Yet based on how SEC play has gone, the worrisome thing for the Big Blue Nation is that there’s been no evidence that UK can keep all its best players on the floor for the six-game run it will take to win it all.

What makes that thought especially frustrating is this reality:

As the 2021-22 regular season enters the homestretch, it seems clear that if Kentucky has all its top players healthy and playing, then the Wildcats are as good as any team in men’s college basketball.

Kellan Grady is among the top 3-point shooters in recent Kentucky basketball history

By Hayes Gardner | Louisville Courier Journal | Feb. 13

Five minutes into Kentucky’s matchup with Florida on Saturday evening, Keion Brooks found himself wide open underneath the basket, received a pass, and threw down a backscratcher dunk to give the Wildcats a 20-6 lead.

Brooks had been guarded a moment prior by Florida’s Myreon Jones, but Jones, in a moment of confusion from the Florida defense, sprinted to the corner. It left Brooks open for the dunk, but Jones apparently had a more pressing concern on his mind: Kellan Grady standing at the 3-point line.

To that point, Grady had already hit his first three 3-pointers for UK, giving the Wildcats an early cushion. UK would go on to win 78-57.

The UK super senior shooting guard then went cold from deep, missing seven-straight treys before making his last, and afterwards, coach John Calipari mentioned to Grady that he “couldn’t make a shot.” But even on a bad shooting night for Grady, he still made 4-of-11 (36%, which is above the national average of 33%), and distracted opponents enough, like Jones on that play early, to leave teammates open on multiple occasions.

Grady’s shot-making from distance this season has been instrumental to a Wildcat offense that ranks fourth in efficiency, per KenPom, and during Calipari’s tenure at UK, he’s among the most accurate and prolific 3-point shooters the Wildcats have had.

A Davidson transfer, Grady has displayed the ability to make 3s from running off of screens and quickly positioning his body, from pump faking and taking a side dribble, and shooting from NBA range, too. He’s made 73-of-167 treys this season, good for 43.7%.

That number would rank fourth all-time for a UK career (Doron Lamb has the record with 47.5%) and eighth for a single season (Travis Ford made a UK-best 52.9% of his attempts during the 1992-93 season).

When asked how Grady compares to other elite shooters at UK, Calipari had several names to choose from — the first of which being the most accurate threat from deep in the program’s history.

“Doron Lamb ... he’d go get 25 (points) in a minute if you left him open,” Calipari said. “And I’ve had Devin Booker, he’s not too bad. But we also had Aaron Harrison, who would knock down shots. I’m leaving guys out, Malik Monk, come on, we’ve had a bunch here.”

But Grady’s in the conversation as one of UK’s top 3-point threats in recent years. He’s on pace to become the fifth UK player to hit 100 3s in a season and even has a chance to break Jodie Meeks’ season mark of 117.

The Wildcats, as usual, don’t rely on the 3-point shot nearly as much as other teams, and UK gets 61% of its points from 2-pointers, which is the 5th-highest in the country. But Grady, alongside TyTy Washington and Davion Mintz, forces teams to guard the perimeter; on one possession Saturday in which star UK big man Oscar Tshiebwe grabbed an offensive rebound, two Gators ran towards Grady on the perimeter, allowing Tshiebwe to muscle past a single defender for a layup.

Grady averages 12.1 points per game in UK’s balanced offense, and he’s seen a

smaller role at UK as compared to his four years at Davidson. He’s never averaged fewer points, assists or rebounds in a season — but he’s also never averaged more 3-pointers made.

He’s become something of a 3-point specialist for the Wildcats, and three-quarters of his shot attempts are from distance. When Grady faced UK in the 2018 NCAA Tournament as a member of Davidson, he attempted nine 2-pointers, which is more than he’s ever shot in a game as a Wildcat.

Against Florida, even a fast break layup from Grady ended up being worth three points after he was fouled and converted the and-one free throw.

Grady finished with 15 points and afterwards spent 30 minutes signing autographs and taking pictures with fans. It was a nightcap for what had been another marathon game for the 24-year old: he played every minute of the game, save for 31 seconds.

“I had to take him out because he missed four (3-pointers) in a row. I had to. But his job was to keep shooting,” Calipari explained of Grady’s brief time on the bench.

He played the game’s first 27 minutes — the only player on either team to do so — before exiting the game for a breather. Half a minute later, TyTy Washington got injured after Florida’s Brandon McKissic dove for a loose ball, and Grady re-entered, never checking out again.

Grady plays more minutes than any Wildcat, fouls the least (so he’s never forced to sit with foul trouble), and has played at least 36 minutes in seven-straight games. Calipari said earlier this season that he’s playing Grady “too many minutes.”

“I’d like to get his minutes down to 30, 28. It’s hard to play 38 minutes,” Calipari said.

But it’s been just as hard to keep him off the court. His modest shooting performance Saturday notwithstanding, Grady’s skillset — including his ability to shoot — has led to him playing almost every minute in UK’s games recently, and it doesn’t seem like that will change.

Grady has said he’s comfortable with the heavy load. His 3-point make with 21 seconds left Saturday served as evidence that he’s able to play a lot and still do one of his essential jobs: make 3s.

“My body is used to it,” Grady, who averaged 36 minutes per game at Davidson, said earlier this season. “The way we practice and the emphasis on playing fast keeps us in good shape and it allows me to stay out there.”

The Wildcats next play Tuesday at Tennessee. If history is any indicator — Grady has hit a 3 in 19-straight games — he’s likely to connect on a trey or two.

And even if he doesn’t, his ability to shoot may capture the attention of a defender enough to allow a teammate to throw down a dunk.

Oscar Tshiebwe backs up his words, basks in home crowd’s adoration as Kentucky rips Florida

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Feb. 12

Oscar Tshiebwe met with a 16-year-old Kentucky fan named Lauren on Friday and made her a promise about the game against Florida on Saturday: “We will win, and I will get 20 rebounds for you.” He came up one short, but 27 points, 19 rebounds and three steals in a 78-57 trouncing of the Gators should probably count. Tshiebwe made good on his word. He and the Wildcats played so well, so inspired, that Lauren could no doubt feel it even if she could not see it. She has a medical condition that has taken her vision, but anyone inside Rupp Arena on Saturday could hear how it was going.

“Electric,” Florida coach Mike White called it. “That volume can drain you a little bit, and it got really loud.”

Rupp was thunderous when Kellan Grady splashed his first three 3-point attempts and Kentucky raced out to a 20-6 lead. Ear-splitting again when the Cats swatted away Florida’s comeback bid with a 15-4 blitz to start the second half. Eerily quiet when freshman star TyTy Washington suffered what looked like a serious left leg injury with 12:50 to go. Booming again — but with boos, the sound of fury — every time Gators guard Brandon McKissic touched the ball the rest of the game. Although it did not look malicious, McKissic dove into Washington’s legs and caused one to buckle. Kentucky fans could not, would not forgive it, because they understand that a special season is in progress. These Cats, the redeemers of so much misery last season, have won six straight and 10 of 11, and they still haven’t lost a game at full strength since the middle of December.

Lately, it feels like only a major injury could derail fifth-ranked Kentucky (21-4, 10-2 SEC). And that’s why the energy changed at Rupp after Washington went down. He’d given 10 points, six assists and five rebounds without a turnover Saturday. He’d shaken off bad shooting in the first half to catch fire in the second. Then there he was, in a heap, pounding the floor and shaking his head, then hopping on one leg out of the arena with a look of grave concern on his face. The Cats led by 10 at that point, but it was hard for anyone to celebrate much without knowing whether their national championship dreams had just taken a massive hit.

This is a team whose only two losses in the past two months came when Washington and point guard Sahvir Wheeler went down during games at LSU and Auburn. This time, though, Kentucky mashed the gas after Washington's injury. Tshiebwe dominated the paint over those final 12-plus minutes, delivering almost a double-double just in that span. Super sub Davion Mintz, whom coach John Calipari has rightly been promoting for SEC Sixth Man of the Year, splashed a pair of dagger 3-pointers. Tshiebwe's backup, Lance Ware, who just keeps scratching out more and more playing time, quite literally squared up to fight feisty Florida, which had won four in a row and badly needed this upset to bolster its NCAA Tournament hopes. Ware snared seven rebounds — four on the offensive glass — and scored four points in just 14 minutes, earning a chorus of appreciation.

"Kentucky is really good," White said. "This is a team that's got a chance to win the whole thing."

With a caveat: as long as Washington is OK.

The Cats played so well without him this time that Rupp roared again, more jubilant than jeering, even before anyone knew how serious the injury was. The crowd made such a joyful noise that surely Washington could hear it in the bowels of the arena, where he was getting an X-ray on his left ankle. It was negative, Calipari eventually revealed. The coach said he laughed with Washington after the game, poking him about being overly dramatic, and declared his status "day to day." Later, Calipari said Washington "might be out a week or two." Not great for the trip to surging Tennessee on Tuesday night, but that doesn't sound like a major injury. It does sound like a disaster averted.

As deep and talented as the Cats are, it's hard to imagine their reaching a Final Four without a playmaker like Washington. And yet there's something to be said for how they've played so far in his absence. They still had a chance to win at the end against LSU and Auburn while Washington sat. Finally, on Saturday, they figured out how to drop the hammer despite being short-handed. Jacob Toppin was also sidelined Saturday because of an ankle injury. It did not matter.

Kentucky turned the ball over just five times and dominated the glass, 41-25, buoyed by Tshiebwe's 19th double-double and fifth game of at least 20 points and 15 boards, something no other SEC player has done in the past 25 years. It was quite a statement just days after the school officially launched his campaign for national player of the year with an Academy Awards-themed "Oscar Worthy" promo.

"He plays his heart out," Calipari said of

Tshiebwe, who is averaging 16.4 points and 15.3 rebounds. "There may be a couple players that are having more of an impact on games than him, but I'd have to see them. And I'd have to say over the long haul, he's doing things that haven't been done for 45 years."

For that, and because of his endless charisma, Tshiebwe has become a fan favorite who is becoming one of the most beloved Kentucky players in years. Admirers line up after every game hoping to get a picture with or autograph from him, and he obliges until someone comes along and drags him away from the crowd.

"My relationship with these fans means a lot," he said. "I'm just so grateful to see people are cheering for you like that. It is a blessing. Anything for them, I can do it. I'm encouraging my teammates to do exactly the same thing. The way they care about us, the way they follow us everywhere, I would say it's crazy. I've never seen something like this in my life."

On Friday morning, Tshiebwe made a surprise visit to Beaumont Middle School in Lexington, where there is a group of students from Africa — like him — who are adjusting to life in the United States. He talked to them, mostly in Swahili, about the challenges he overcame making the same journey they are on. He signed posters for them and encouraged them to remember where they came from and embrace new opportunities here.

Later in the day, he met Lauren, who started listening to Kentucky games on the radio when her vision faded. She fell in love with Tshiebwe and Mintz because of how they sounded over the airwaves — the descriptions of their play, the interviews they gave afterward.

"She told me I'm her favorite player," Tshiebwe said. "That's why I came today with a different mindset. I said, 'Today, I've got to rebound for her.'"

Forget player of the year. Of course his teammates think "Big O" deserves that.

"But I wish there was just a Person of the Year," Wheeler said. "Just how Oscar is as a person, I think that's why all the success is coming back to him. Just the way he's selfless, the way he's looking to give back, the way he takes his time to greet others who aren't in his circle or in his vicinity, just being able to put a smile on someone's face, that comes around. That comes back to you. I think some people call it karma."

These Cats, led by their biggest star, have endeared themselves to the fan base unlike any group in probably a half-dozen years, if not longer. Washington's latest injury was a reminder that nothing is promised, that all of this fun could be snuffed out in an instant, but perhaps it

also prompted some 20,000 folks at Rupp on Saturday to pause and enjoy this group. To live in that moment and bask in it. To appreciate what this team is right now, no matter how it ends.

"We stayed together," Tshiebwe said. "We know there's an injury that might happen, but we cannot lose focus. We stayed together. We love each other and care about each other. That's what's good about this team."

When Tshiebwe finished his postgame television interview on the court Saturday and raised a finger to the sky as he walked off, the crowd gave him one of the longest and loudest ovations around here in recent memory. One longtime support staff member said she could not remember one like it, and it brought tears to her eyes as the crowd roared for him. Tshiebwe's new friend Lauren didn't need to see what was happening Saturday to know that he'd fulfilled his promise. Because she could hear it.

Davion Mintz embracing sixth man role

By Aaron Gershon | The Cats Pause
Feb. 11

Kentucky guard Davion Mintz is among the most experienced players in college basketball.

Now in his sixth season thanks to the COVID-related bonus year, Mintz has played at two different schools, played in the NCAA Tournament, SEC Tournament and in front of some of the most raucous crowds in college basketball. However, he has never been asked to be a sixth man, until his final college season.

In 21 games, Mintz has only started twice but has played an average of 23.4 minutes in which he is scoring 8.8 points per game with 2.4 rebounds and 1.9 assists while shooting 39.5 percent from the field and 36.4 percent from 3-point range.

His most impressive performance came Feb. 2 against Vanderbilt, where he logged 35 minutes off the bench and scored a season-high 21 points and knocked down four 3-pointers.

Despite thriving as UK's top sub, it's not something he accustomed to doing. In his first college basketball season at Creighton, Mintz started 12 of the Bluejays' 29 games but in his second year took over starting duties as he drew 32 starting assignments and started all 35 of the team's games in his junior year.

After sitting out the 2019-20 season with an injury, Mintz transferred to Kentucky, where he started 20 of the Cats 25 games last season, in which he averaged a team-best 11.5 points per game.

"I came off the bench before in my

freshman year of college, but it wasn't a sixth-man role," Mintz said. "I've never had a sixth-man role in my life, honestly."

After spending last season as a graduate-student transfer, Mintz took several months to weigh his options but decided to return to Kentucky despite knowing a starting job would be far from guaranteed.

The team had landed five-star high school guard TyTy Washington and got Georgia starting point guard Sahvir Wheeler in the transfer portal. That all but guaranteed Mintz would come off the bench. Still, he has embraced the role that he admitted was difficult at first.

"I had to have my teammates be able to help me, have my supporters to help me and say, 'Hey this is what the team needs from you,'" Mintz said. "My role on the team is what you guys see every night. Bring energy, make shots, defend my guy and do whatever I can do to contribute to win.

"I've embraced it," he said. "It's been a really fun role once you've figured it out and I look forward to going into every game and seeing things I wouldn't have been able to see if I were to start a game."

Something that's helped Mintz adapt to the role has been finding inspiration in three-time NBA sixth-man of the year award winner Lou Williams. The 35-year old guard has been in the NBA since 2005 and has played a good chunk of his career off the bench. He is currently in his 17th pro season and is a member of the Atlanta Hawks.

"He made the sixth man cool. There's rap songs about him," Mintz said. "He really defined that role and made it cool for a lot of kids and upcoming basketball players to want to do. An immature person would laugh and say, you come off the bench, but Lou made it so cool."

His efforts off the bench have been much appreciated by his head coach John Calipari, who has made a case for Mintz to be the SEC's sixth man of the year on his weekly radio show Wednesday.

"Whose playing better than him as a sixth man?" Calipari said. "He's really doing some good stuff."

When asked what winning that award would mean to him, Mintz said, "I put in a lot of time and that right there is a bigger-than-me award. For Coach Cal, with the time and energy he's put towards me and helping me define this role, really does mean a lot to me."

Kentucky basketball's John Calipari: 'People are looking to us' on how to handle NIL deals

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal | Feb. 9

A bill governing how college athletes can profit off their name, image and likeness in Kentucky passed out of a Senate committee on Wednesday following testimony from University of Kentucky athletic director Mitch Barnhart and men's basketball coach John Calipari.

Kentucky college athletes have been free to make money off their own endorsements since Gov. Andy Beshear's executive order went into effect on July 1, 2021, but that order was viewed only as a bridge until a state or federal law could be passed.

"I think it's a model bill," Calipari told the Senate Standing Committee on Education. "I think other states are going to look at this bill and say, 'Wow.'"

Senate Bill 6, sponsored by Republicans Max Wise and Whitney Westerfield and Democrat Morgan McGarvey, includes many of the same restrictions as the current executive order, including prohibiting schools from negotiating any part of an NIL agreement on behalf of a student-athlete.

That restriction drew attention from the committee in the wake of Ohio State recently announcing it was creating a department to directly facilitate NIL deals for athletes. While some pundits have speculated such a department could provide a recruiting advantage for Ohio State and other schools that create similar departments, Barnhart remains opposed to the idea.

"I'm not sure I want our department to be going out there negotiating deals," Barnhart told The Courier Journal in an interview this week. "At our core, we're still about educating, still about competing, still about equipping people to launch them into life. That's our deal. That's what we've been about.

"Part of that education process is (NIL). I don't know that's supposed to be in our DNA. Doesn't mean if that's the boundaries we're given, that's not where we have to be or go, but for right now that's not where we are and we will function within the guidelines and the boundaries we're supposed to."

Barnhart reiterated those comments in his testimony, noting that he and UK's coaches lack the expertise to negotiate deals. Instead, Barnhart advocated for the athletic department being able to refer parties interested in making NIL deals with athletes to the athlete's NIL agent or representative.

Calipari said he has no interest in negotiating deals on behalf of his athletes, but

he wants the bill to include the flexibility to allow athletic departments to eventually do so if forced to by other states allowing the practice. Even under that scenario, Calipari said the negotiations would have to come from someone else in the athletic department instead of himself.

"How do we give Mitch the ability to look at this in a year or two to say, 'This isn't what we want, but we're getting clobbered,'" Calipari told the committee. "Kentucky basketball is the gold standard. It is. People are looking to us, what are we doing ... and what is your state doing?"

Since the executive order went into effect, around 250 UK athletes have signed more than 800 NIL deals, Barnhart said.

While members of the football and men's basketball teams have garnered the most attention with their endorsements, NIL has also had an effect on athletes competing for non-revenue sports. Hurdler Masai Russell, who has the largest social media following of any UK athlete with 435,000 followers on TikTok and 165,000 followers on Instagram, has been particularly active with NIL deals.

As he did when the executive order went into effect, Barnhart again advocated for national guidance from either Congress or whatever version of a college sports governing body results from NCAA reform on NIL to avoid scenarios where schools in each state are operating under different restrictions.

Until that national guidance comes -- if it ever does -- Kentucky and other states will be left to decide whether to respond to moves like Ohio State's new department.

Still, Barnhart remains optimistic the discrepancies created by varying state laws might not have as big an impact on recruiting as some fear.

"I think people are still choosing Kentucky because we're Kentucky," Barnhart told the Courier Journal. "I'm hopeful that will always be the reason. I look at our place and the young people that we have coming through our program. I talk to many of the recruits when they come through. There's maybe a couple of them that say, 'What about the NIL?' Very seldom. Mostly it's about the opportunity I have to compete in an unbelievable league, opportunity to compete at an unbelievable institution, the chance to be with coaches with my best interest at heart and developing me as an individual. Then getting my education.

"So, at our core, I still think that's who we are. I hope people choose Kentucky for that reason, and oh, by the way, we also have this opportunity for you to participate in this NIL space. Awesome, really cool. I think if we begin to foster recruiting and decision-making based upon only that, boy

it could be an interesting time.”

With March around the corner, Kentucky basketball is expanding its room for error

By John Clay | Lexington Herald Leader | Feb. 6

When you plan for the unexpected of the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament, what you need is some unexpected of your own.

On the way to a 19-4 record overall, including an 8-2 SEC mark, this now No. 5-ranked and moving up Kentucky basketball team is finding the unexpected, the unexpected positive.

In UK’s 66-55 win at Alabama on Saturday night, it was Daimion Collins, the slender 6-foot-10 freshman from Atlanta, Texas, who had played all of 25 minutes in the Wildcats’ eight previous SEC games. Collins hadn’t even seen the floor in UK’s last two games, the 80-62 blowout win at Kansas on Jan. 29 or the nip-and-tuck 77-70 victory over Vanderbilt at Rupp Arena on Feb. 2.

And yet there was Collins at Coleman Coliseum — surprise, surprise — jumping on his pogo stick to score 10 points and grab six rebounds in nine minutes of action. That’s right — 10 points and six rebounds in nine minutes. Talk about efficiency.

“The difference-maker,” said UK Coach John Calipari, who was jolted awake Friday night with the thought of what lobs could do to the Alabama defense and just who on his roster could catch those lobs.

“Everyone in the program knows what he can do,” said teammate TyTy Washington of Collins. “He’s 6-10 with a 45-inch vertical.”

Collins is also the latest in a growing line of current Kentucky players who have popped up off the bench to help the Cats’ cause at key times.

Against Vanderbilt, it was reserve guard Damion Mintz who snapped out of a 6-for-26 shooting slump to knock down 21 points against the Commodores. Mintz was 6-of-11 from the floor, 4-of-7 from three-point range and the winning team’s leading scorer.

At Kansas, it was reserve center Lance Ware who scored four points and grabbed four rebounds in 10 minutes, while giving Oscar Tshiebwe a well-deserved break, especially in the first half, as the Cats rolled to their here-we-are statement win over the Jayhawks.

At home against Mississippi State, it was reserve guard Dontae Allen who gave the Cats 18 much-needed minutes while TyTy Washington was out with an ankle injury and Sahvir Wheeler encountered first-half

fast trouble. The Cats managed to beat back the Bulldogs 82-74 in overtime.

At Texas A&M, it was reserve forward Jacob Toppin who scored nine points, grabbed six rebounds and dished two assists in 23 minutes during the Wildcats’ grind-it-out 64-58 victory over the Aggies in College Station.

“The other guy we gotta get in, but he’s gotta earn more minutes is Bryce (Hopkins),” said Calipari on Saturday of his freshman forward.

“Options” is the key word here. Calipari has a dependable five in his starting lineup, but as the coach says, they’re not robots. One or two are bound to have an off night at any time. They key is to have options the head coach can trust when one or more of the starters are not on his game.

It’s even better to have different options, players that step up at different times to meet the moment. Enter Collins. Calipari operates with a three-guard lineup to go along with the 6-foot-7 Keion Brooks at the four spot and Tshiebwe at center. What he has needed is another so-called big who can spell or complement the rebounding machine he has at center.

“Now he has forced me to figure out how to play him,” Calipari said of Collins. “Now it’s on me.”

Actually, it’s on everyone. As the Cats have proved over these past couple of weeks, they are a legitimate national championship contender. Math maven Ken Pomeroy had Kentucky No. 3 in his overall efficiency rankings heading into Sunday, just behind Gonzaga and Arizona.

To win it all, however, you have to win six straight games. And to win six straight games, you have to have players who can step up and meet the moment. The more of those players the better.

“You need all the weapons you can have because you don’t know,” Calipari said Saturday. “When you have that kind of depth, you have a lot of room for error.”

Unselfish Lance Ware giving Cats key contributions off bench

By Jeff Drummond | Cats Illustrated Feb. 2

On a team that features four players who have scored 25 or more points in a game, one who has broken a school record, and another who is in contention for national player of the year honors, it can be difficult for a Lance Ware to stand out.

That’s what the sophomore forward has done, however, in providing No. 5 Kentucky with important minutes off the bench in relief of star big man Oscar Tshiebwe.

“When I get into a game, I try to provide as much energy as possible, to provide a spark,” Ware said on Tuesday ahead of the

Wildcats’ matchup with Vanderbilt.

Ware’s averages of 1.9 points and 1.9 rebounds per game are not going to earn him much time on SportsCenter, or even the local sports segment, but the 6-foot-9 New Jersey native has drawn praise from his coaches for his contributions to UK’s surging 17-4 club.

“Unbelievable how he’s playing,” Kentucky head coach John Calipari said after Ware scored four points and grabbed four rebounds in the Cats’ 80-62 win at Kansas. “... He’s gotten so much better, so much more confident. More competent, which is why he’s more confident.

“But I told him, you’re playing behind this -- I don’t even know what the heck (to call Tshiebwe) -- this unique (player)... You’re behind him, so whatever minutes you get, you’ve got to take advantage of them.”

Added UK assistant coach Chin Coleman: “We talk about being ready when your number is called. No one has done that to the level that Lance has done it.”

In playing behind Tshiebwe, who is averaging 16.3 points and a nation-leading 15.1 rebounds per game, Ware has seen his minutes slip from 12 per game as a freshman to less than seven as a sophomore. But after being on a team that went 9-16 last season and missed the NCAA Tournament, he has a better appreciation for his current role.

“It’s the cards I was dealt,” Ware said. “Oscar is really good, and the way he’s playing right now is just unbelievable... I just want to help my team win every single game.”

That’s not a throwaway line, either.

“He’s the biggest cheerleader for the other guys,” Coleman said of Ware, who can often be spotted standing applauding his teammates from the bench.

On Monday during his weekly radio call-in show, Calipari said Ware has been a big example of the Cats “buying in” this season.

“One of the things I try to tell these guys, and I told them again today, is you have to understand 95% of the players in the NBA are role players,” Calipari said. “... So then it becomes, if you want to be a professional, what’s your role? What would it be? It ain’t gonna be, ‘I’m gonna take all the shots.’ That’s eighth-grade basketball. ‘If I score more, I’m going to be more of a star.’ Sorry.

“Be the star at your role. That may be defending or being long. Making mid-level shots. Knowing as a secondary scorer, I’m shooting a high percentage. I’m going to rebound. I’m going to fight. If it’s a 50/50 (ball) I’m going to get it because I want to win. That’s what you win with.”

'It must've been something in the pregame meal': Keion Brooks Jr. puts up 27 as Kentucky stomps Kansas on the road

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Jan. 30

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Oh, sure, he looked happy. And proud. Deliriously happy and proud. But mostly, as the final minutes ticked away on No. 12 Kentucky's stunning beatdown of No. 5 Kansas on Saturday night, Keion Brooks Sr. looked exhausted in the rafters of Allen Fieldhouse, just a couple of rows from the top, in the corner, in Section 13. He was sweaty and breathless and hoarse. There had been an unexpected two-hour party up there, where an unusually large horde of visiting fans made a constant joyful noise, and Brooks was the unlikely guest of honor. Because that was his son Keion Jr. down there on the court, delivering the game of his life as the Wildcats ran the Jayhawks out of their own gym.

"We've been going crazy up here," Brooks Sr. said from his perch in the nosebleeds. "It's just such a fun environment, one of the greatest places in basketball, with all the history here, and I'm just so happy to get this situation. You work for days like these when you're in the gym when he's 5, 6 years old. You imagine days like these back then, coming to play in a place this special, on a stage this big, and having your moment. You just love to see that dream come true for your son."

The final score — Kentucky 80, Kansas 62 — made a massive statement about what the winner is and might be. Good enough to make a Final Four run? Oh, hell yes.

"That's a team we played tonight that can win it all," said Jayhawks coach Bill Self, who knows what a John Calipari-coached contender looks like. He lost to the Wildcats in a national championship game 10 years ago and got steamrolled by the 38-1 UK team in 2015. The thing about those dominant squads was you never knew who on the roster might light you up on any given night.

That's why what Brooks did Saturday, pouring in a career-high 27 points and grabbing eight rebounds, says as much about what makes the Cats special as the margin of victory (even though it was the worst Kentucky has ever beaten a top-five team on the road). Because Brooks is not the star of this team. He's not the second option. Or third. He's taken the road less traveled for a former five-star recruit in a program that churns out one-and-done lottery picks. There have been flashes of what the bouncy, 6-foot-7 forward might become, but Brooks is a junior who started just nine total games in his first two years

and averaged right around 10 points per game over the past two seasons.

To say it was startling, then, that he dropped almost three times that many in Kansas, where the Jayhawks have been damn near unbeatable under Self, is an understatement.

"I'm just so happy for him," his father said. "I've always just told him to stick with it, keep doing the things that help your team win and be the best teammate you can be. Keep fighting, play hard and your time will come. Your time is on your time, not on anybody else's. All you need to do is be patient, keep your head down, keep working. When we talked earlier today, he told me he felt like he was going to have himself a day. I guess it must've been something in the pregame meal."

Nope, Brooks Jr. said. He ate the usual: a little chicken, a little salmon and some mashed potatoes, washed down by a Gatorade and bottle of water to stay hydrated. He couldn't explain the premonition. He just felt good at shootaround and figured if he could get a putback dunk early in the game, it would set a tone and spark the kind of energy that typically fuels his best performances. And what do you know? He slammed in a teammate's miss for Kentucky's second bucket of the night against Kansas.

With that, Brooks and the Wildcats were off and running. When he thundered down a lob from point guard Sahvir Wheeler right before halftime, it sent UK to the locker room with a 20-point lead.

"It's just the way we're built, the type of team, the type of guys we have," Brooks said. "We know it's not going to be the same person every night. And when we find that guy and find out it's his night, we're going to keep trying to get him the ball. Tonight was my night."

Brooks became the fourth player on the team to score at least 25 points in a game, joining Wheeler, freshman guard TyTy Washington Jr. and national player of the year candidate Oscar Tshiebwe, who had 17 points, 14 rebounds and four steals Saturday and somehow got overshadowed. That happens when a role player steps up and puts the team on his back.

After Kansas trimmed a 22-point deficit to 17 early in the second half, Brooks swished a baseline jump shot, then snared offensive rebounds, got fouled and made free throws on three consecutive possessions. When the Jayhawks threw a triangle-and-2 defense at the Wildcats and their offense stalled — after KU got the home crowd back rocking by cutting the margin to 14 points with 13 minutes to play — Brooks swished back-to-back jumpers from the free-throw line. In all, Brooks scored 15 consecutive points for Kentucky.

"I'll be honest with you: I didn't anticipate Keion going for 27. He was great," Self said. "We don't have anybody on our team that could do what Keion did on that lob that Sahvir gave him in the first half. We got one guy who can go upstairs as good as anybody, and then after that, we don't have guys like that."

That Brooks is a guy like that and he's Kentucky's fifth option most games is a little bit scary. Not many teams have a fifth option capable of hitting 9 of 16 shots and 9 of 10 free throws against an elite team on the road, as he did Saturday.

"I told him while we were on the bench, 'You won this game — because we were dying and you made stuff out of nothing,'" Calipari said. "That's not being cute. That's just saying: 'I'm going to fight. I'm fighting.' He proved today — please stop with the 27 points, it doesn't matter — that it's all about that energy, that spirit, that competitiveness, that fight. 'I'm beating that other guy.' He got beat on one rebound and walked over and said, 'That was my fault.' He's creating a new habit of playing that way. I'm happy for him."

Even better, so were Brooks' teammates. They ambushed him in the locker room, howling and spraying him with their water bottles in celebration. "I'm so proud of him," Tshiebwe said. "He was unbelievable. I want him to keep coming like that every night. That's how we're going to be a top team, if everybody steps up like that."

Even during the game, when Calipari tried to sub out Brooks and put in fellow power forward Jacob Toppin, Toppin declined. He's rolling. Don't stop now.

"This is when you know we're becoming a good team," Calipari said. "That's when I know they're becoming empowered."

Throttling Kansas taught us a lot of things about the Cats (17-4). Yes, they'd blown out a bunch of bad-to-average teams, even smashed North Carolina by 29 and Tennessee by 28, but they hadn't yet beaten a truly upper-echelon opponent or won a significant road game. Some of that was just terrible luck. Wheeler and Washington were injured in road games against ranked LSU and Auburn. The Wildcats were still in those games late, and one might even assume they'd have won them if they'd been at full strength, but they weren't and they didn't.

This time, though, Calipari finally had his whole squad available and delivered a resounding message. Wheeler, the SEC assist leader, had eight of them Saturday. Kellan Grady, the SEC 3-point leader, swished four of them against the Jayhawks — a couple of them absolutely breathtaking in their degree of difficulty. Tshiebwe, the nation's leading rebounder, went for his average and recorded a 15th double-

double. Washington hit only 1 of 9 shots in his return from an ankle injury, but he had five assists and three steals and posted the second-best plus/minus on the team.

Then Brooks went off to make it 5-for-5 among the starters, and Toppin threw in 11 points in 11 minutes off the bench for good measure. It was a dazzling display of weaponry. A real flex by Kentucky about what is possible.

"That was one of our main focuses as a team," Brooks said. "We've gone to some very tough environments against some ranked opponents on the road, and we didn't come out with a win, no matter what the circumstances were with people getting hurt. We knew we didn't get it done, and we knew we had an opportunity tonight, getting everybody back healthy, to play a really good team that's coached really, really well and see how good we were. And we went in and made a statement."

Up in the rafters, his father beamed. Keion Sr.'s sweat-soaked bald head gleamed. The former Wright State star, who had 1,766 points, 494 rebounds, 397 assists and 200 steals in college, could not help but have flashbacks Saturday. Keion Jr. transported him to those old days in Fort Wayne, Ind., when father and son trained together and worked on so many free-throw jump shots for a stretchy four man playing alongside a traditional center. His boy always was so good from that spot.

"To see him get that look again, be confident again, it was great," Brooks Sr. said. "He's really taking me back. That's the player I've always known he could be. I'm just sitting here thinking how proud I am of that kid, because he kept working, kept fighting and found a way."

Vise grips, relentless effort and a 'big ass': How Oscar Tshiebwe's record-smashing rebounding has revived Kentucky

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Jan. 27

The hardest part for Oscar Tshiebwe being at West Virginia when he already wanted to be at Kentucky last fall was watching the Wildcats play. While the Mountaineers seemed to have too much of a good thing, which meant a diminishing role for Tshiebwe in the frontcourt timeshare with Derek Culver, UK had virtually zero post presence. John Calipari's team was easily bullied. Those Cats ranked among college basketball's worst in two-point percentage, defensive rebounding and general toughness. They started 1-6, and then Tshiebwe packed his bags and headed to Lexington.

"Every time I watched Kentucky play, I regretted it. 'That should be me right there. That big man right there? That should be me.' I regretted it all the time,"

he says now. "But my daddy used to tell me, 'It's never too late in life. You can start from today and make a big impact.' When I saw Kentucky struggling, I just couldn't wait. My reason to transfer in the middle of the season was I didn't want to sit out a year (under the old rules). No more waiting."

A little more than a year after he made that decision, the verdict is in: Tshiebwe is, in fact, exactly what the Wildcats needed. And vice versa.

He's averaging 16.3 points, 15.2 rebounds, 1.6 blocks, 1.6 steals and shooting 61.5 percent from the field for 12th-ranked Kentucky, which will play at No. 5 Kansas on Saturday. Tshiebwe not only leads the team in each of those categories, he's one of the most dominant glass cleaners in decades. Only two Division I players since 1986 have averaged more boards in a season than Tshiebwe is through 20 games. His total rebound percentage (28.6) would be the best in the dozen years that Basketball Reference has tracked it. If his current pace holds, he'd become just the eighth player since 1993 to average at least 16 points and 14 rebounds. Tim Duncan, Blake Griffin and Kenneth Faried are on that list. No one in 40 years has averaged 15 points and 15 rebounds through 20 games, per Basketball Reference.

And to answer the most important question: Yes, all of this impacts winning. Tshiebwe ranks second nationally in win shares per 40 minutes, sixth in box score plus/minus and comfortably leads Ken Pomeroy's metric-based player of the year standings, ahead of Gonzaga's Drew Timme, Ohio State's EJ Liddell and Wisconsin's Johnny Davis. None of the math can capture Tshiebwe's warrior spirit and relentless positivity, which seem to have infected Kentucky's team, so his value is both obvious and impossible to quantify.

"It's immeasurable, the impact that Oscar Tshiebwe has on our basketball team," Wildcats assistant coach Chin Coleman says. Except in the ways that are measurable. Like possessions. "It's a possession game, right? For us, the more possessions we get, the more opportunities we get to score. If we can be plus-10 to plus-15 in possessions, we give ourselves a better chance to win," Coleman continues. And Oscar equals extra possessions. "There's not one player in the country that impacts a team more than he does. Getting 16 rebounds in a game, 20 rebounds in a game is unheard of. So he tips the scale for us in terms of possessions."

Tuesday's overtime win against Mississippi State was a perfect example of Tshiebwe's impact. He finished with 21 points and 22 rebounds, recording the first 20-20 game at Kentucky since 1976.

Tshiebwe, who set the Rupp Arena record earlier this season with 28 rebounds against Western Kentucky, has had five 20-rebound games this season. That ties Blake Griffin and Tim Duncan for most 20-rebound games in a career by a major-conference player since 1997.

Last season, which was Kentucky's worst in almost a century, the Wildcats ranked 269th in defensive rebound percentage, 41st in offensive rebounding percentage and averaged 2.4 fewer field-goal attempts per game than opponents. This season, UK is No. 11 in defensive rebound percentage, No. 1 in offensive rebounding percentage and averages 5.4 more field-goal attempts per game than opponents. An almost eight-shot-per-game swing is huge, especially considering how much better these Cats are at actually shooting than last year's.

"His defensive rebounding allows teams just to get one shot at it," assistant Orlando Antigua says. "And it allows us to get in transition a lot quicker. Half the offensive rebounds you get wind up in fouls or 3-pointers, and we're not allowing other teams to do that. And on the opposite end of it, he's going and getting us second and third opportunities. With the talent level that we have, we want more opportunities to score."

Tshiebwe is providing them.

He has prolonged 93 possessions, resulting in an extra 120 points. That's good for an extra six points per game.

With Tshiebwe on the floor, Kentucky averages 124.6 points per 100 possessions and allows just 86.4. With him off the floor, the Cats score and surrender the exact same amount: 98.7 points per 100 possessions. Put another way: John Calipari is lucky that so far Tshiebwe hasn't had major foul trouble or suffered any significant injury, because UK's frontcourt would be just as hopeless as it was a year ago in either case.

"Oscar is one of the most unique players in the country," guard Davion Mintz says. "I don't think anyone provides what he does to a team. His accountability for rebounding and inspiring other guys to go rebound kind of brings us up to the 90th, 100th percentile. If Oscar just keeps doing what he's doing, it's going to keep us in the win column."

So how does Tshiebwe do it? LSU coach Will Wade recently offered a scouting report, but it was not overly technical.

"He puts his big ass at the front of the rim, and he's physical and he just eats up every basketball," Wade said, before offering a major understatement. "That can be problematic. He's the most effective rebounder in the country. Oscar is just big and physical and just throws you out of the way and he goes and gets the ball."

There's a little more to it than that. In fact, Tshiebwe isn't especially tall — just 6-9 in sneakers — but he does have an elite, 7-foot-4 wingspan. He is also stout, a chiseled 255 pounds with only 8.9 percent body fat, but hardly all ass. In fact, he doesn't always use that ass to box out. If someone is in front of him, he'll try to push that guy under the bucket. If his man is to the side, Tshiebwe typically holds him off with a forearm that looks like it belongs to a professional arm wrestler. If his man is behind him, then yes, it's butt city.

But Tshiebwe's hands are the real heroes here. They measured 9 1/4 inches long and 10 3/4 inches wide at UK's pro day, which would make them among the largest mitts at any NBA Combine over the last several years. And they're not just big. "Vise grips," Antigua says.

"The strongest hands I've ever witnessed and I'll bet anyone has ever witnessed," teammate Kellan Grady insists.

"The second piece of it," Calipari says, "is ... when he leans on you, he can then jump. You cannot jump. He's not pushing you, you're just having 255 lean on you. He'll jump to get it and you're just (stuck). The coach: 'Go get it!' Go get it? I've got a weight on my shoulders of 300 pounds. You go get it."

This what that looks like. He can hold off a player like North Carolina center Armando Bacot, 6-10 and 240 pounds, with just a forearm.

Bacot is not just another dude, either. He averages a double-double and just became the first Tar Heel in 57 years to record 10 consecutive double-doubles in one season.

Opponents get buried under the rim, like their feet are stuck in quicksand and Tshiebwe is at the surface gobbling up all the rebounds.

This is a good place to point out that rarely are teams or individuals elite at both offensive and defensive rebounding. Those are different skills. In fact, sometimes a team (or player) is great at one and terrible at the other. Tshiebwe has a chance to become the only player besides Faried in the KenPom era to lead the nation in both offensive and defensive rebound percentage. His combination of physical gifts and mental approach to crashing the glass make that possible.

Tshiebwe credits West Virginia coach Bob Huggins with teaching him the finer points of rebounding. Huggins' philosophy is that most outside shots that miss will bounce to the opposite side of the basket from which they came. He hammered that notion into Tshiebwe's head — when the ball goes up, get to the other side — with punishment runs as motivation not to forget.

"That really helped me," Tshiebwe says. "You gotta stop watching the ball. Most people, when somebody shoots the ball, they're watching the ball. No, you gotta go position yourself in the place where you might get the ball. And as soon as you're positioned right there, don't let anybody move you out."

At Kentucky, he seems to have held onto that general concept, getting position and never letting anyone move him, while letting go of Huggins' hard-and-fast rule about rushing to the opposite side. In fact, whether on offense or defense, Tshiebwe seems to always search for the top of the charge circle when a shot goes up. He trusts his reaction time, athleticism and strength to get from neutral ground to whichever side the ball caroms.

There's another position in another sport altogether where such a skill set is invaluable.

Turns out, growing up playing soccer in the Congo nurtured some natural instincts that help Tshiebwe today.

"I was a goalie," he says. "You gotta catch everything. You gotta fly for everything. Somebody kicks the ball, they better not score. You gotta jump, do the best you can, find the ball. I think that really helped me, too, when it came to basketball. Every time somebody shoots the ball, my mind is like I'm the goalie. I don't want anybody to score. As long as I catch the ball and it's in my hands, I feel like the goal is protected. My eyes are always trying to find the ball and go get it."

Kentucky has given the machine room to roam and romp. It's not just the glass, of course. Tshiebwe is in a system at Kentucky that fits his talents.

At West Virginia, Huggins was trying to play in another era by pairing Tshiebwe and Culver. The numbers illustrated that they were productive apart, but they basically got in each other's way when together. It's just not easy to run offense with two guys who belong posting up on the block.

Tshiebwe is getting a higher frequency of post-ups this season and been more efficient. He's scoring 4.4 points per game on post-ups and shooting a solid 58.3 percent on those opportunities — up from 48.1 percent last year, per Synergy.

"It is about confidence," Tshiebwe says. "They give me much confidence. Coaches say, 'You are one-on-one in the post, finish it. You are one-on-one, shoot it. Double-team, look for your teammates.' And they trust me, that I can do a lot of things. Beginning of the season to now, I've got a lot of confidence now. I can see the court really good when I've got the ball. I think I grew a little bit since the beginning of the season."

Tshiebwe is not a two-trick pony on the

offensive end, either. Calipari's offense caters to his abilities and comfort zone. Just like his rebounding, Tshiebwe likes to operate from the middle of the floor. He makes for an excellent pick-and-roll partner with both TyTy Washington and Sahvir Wheeler. His wide frame is ideal for applying screens, obviously, and then he's nimble enough to flip his hips and demand attention on his rolls. During Kentucky's pro day, Tshiebwe had the second-fastest lane agility and three-quarter-court sprint times on the team. Kentucky runs a lot of middle ball screens, so he can either roll all the way to rim or short roll to the top of the key area, where he's capable of shooting the 17-footer. He's shooting 40 percent on catch-and-shoot jumpers, according to Synergy, which makes him at least a threat.

Calipari also has a weapon in Grady he can use to manipulate the tag, putting the defense in a bind. Do you give Washington or Wheeler a runway, leave Tshiebwe open for a lob or sell out to potentially allow a catch-and-shoot Grady 3? It's not a mish-mash of talent. The pieces fit together.

Even the four men — Keion Brooks and Jacob Toppin — pair well with Tshiebwe. They always seem to be looking for him in the dunker spot when they drive, and they also smartly circle in for longer rebounds so Kentucky has a large swath of the court covered when a shot goes up. And when Tshiebwe's off the floor, both Brooks and Toppin's rebounding rates are better than they've ever been. Kentucky remains an elite rebounding team without Tshiebwe, which is a testament to the mentality he's created.

The one difference between Tshiebwe and most centers Calipari has had is that he doesn't block as many shots, but Kentucky is still solid in that area — 42nd in block rate — and great shot-blocking teams usually are susceptible to allowing offensive rebounds. Tshiebwe has the ability to contest and not take himself out of rebounding position. Kentucky is one of five teams that rank in the top 50 in block rate and defensive rebounding percentage.

That's allowed Kentucky to get out and run. Last season the Cats ranked 121st in transition points, per Synergy. This year they rank second and are No. 1 among high-majors.

That's the Tshiebwe effect.

"He's an enigma that I'm sure gives teams nightmares," Coleman says. "And it's just pure effort. Has nothing to do with schemes. It's just his will, his effort, and his knack for the ball."

'Mind-ready' Dontaie Allen sparks Kentucky

By Darrell Bird | The Cats Pause | Jan. 26

Baseball's pinch hitter is one of sports' ultimate challenges. You sit idly in the dugout until the manager, often without warning, calls your name. A few practice swings and then it's up to the plate to face a 90 mph fastball with the expectation you get a base hit.

Basketball may not shine the spotlight so brightly as a substitute can blend in with four other teammates and ease into the competition. But the challenges, especially at a place like Kentucky, remain the same, namely the uncertainty of when your name might be called and how to ensure you perform.

It begs the question of how can a player can meet that challenge?

Is it mostly physical, a player so gifted they can fall out of bed and make a 3-point basket?

Or is it all mental and being able to stay in the moment and ready to go no matter how many minutes, or even games, might pass until that opportunity presents itself?

Kentucky coach John Calipari, who often preaches about players being ready to seize their opportunity, thinks he knows the answer.

"Most of it is being mind-ready and mind-fresh," Calipari said. "Knowing if things don't go well that I've worked hard."

The "next man up" topic surfaced on Tuesday night during Kentucky's 82-74 overtime win against Mississippi State. In that game, Dontaie Allen came off the bench to play 17:31 with five points and three rebounds.

His slam dunk offensive rebound, which shocked fans and teammates alike, marked his first points scored since Nov. 29.

"A lot of these guys have the weight of the world on them," Calipari said. "Everyone is like, 'You've got to do this and you've got to do that and you've got to play like this and you've got to say this.' They have got the weight of the world. My job is to hold them accountable, but also figure out ways to talk about how we get this done.

"It's hard for you to have that positive self-talk," the coach added. "But you've got to have it. Because if you don't love yourself, and you're not good to you, no one is going to be good to you. You've got to be good to yourself. That means blocking out the negative and be really positive."

That was a monumental task for Allen. Once the calendar flipped to December, Allen's playing time nearly vanished. He played three minutes or less in 11 of the 12 games, including never leaving the UK bench on five occasions. The stat line was zero points on 0-for-7 shooting.

But on Tuesday, Allen had five points and three rebounds when foul trouble forced him into action.

Using Allen's performance, Calipari addressed the big-picture issue of playing time at Kentucky.

"You've got to take responsibility first for your performance," Calipari said. "Are you playing harder than the guy you're playing against or is he playing harder than you?"

"Well you say, 'Just let him play through it.' OK. So he plays four minutes, gives up two baskets and gives up a rebound and doesn't make a shot. Wait a minute. This isn't eighth grade," he said. "Own your performance.

"It's hard for Lance Ware," Calipari said. "Is Oscar (Tshiebwe) going to play so well that I'm not getting any minutes, or is he going to struggle and be in foul trouble and I'm ready?"

Calipari contends there is only one way to prepare for that time when your name is called.

"Every day, Lance Ware is in the gym getting better. Every single day," Calipari said. "I look out my window and that kid's in there. I have all the confidence in the world.

"We went with Bryce (Hopkins). He did OK," Calipari said. "But he didn't come up with rebounds and balls. But he dunked that one. There you go. Rebounding and defense and diving on the floor – it doesn't take skill. You don't have to think. You just have to scramble and hustle and that's what I'm trying to get these guys to do."

Kentucky wins in OT to give John Calipari his 800th career victory

By Gary Graves | Associated Press | Jan. 25

To John Calipari, his latest milestone only means he's been coaching a long time.

Fittingly, No. 12 Kentucky and the Hall of Fame coach needed an five extra minutes to reach 800 career on-court victories.

Kellan Grady scored eight points in overtime, including consecutive 3-pointers about a minute apart, and Sahvir Wheeler added two free throws to lift the Wildcats over Mississippi State 82-74 on Tuesday night.

"I have to publicly thank all my players, going back to UMass and Memphis and here," Calipari said of winning that many games.

Grady finished with 18 points and Oscar Tshiebwe added 21 points with 22 rebounds for Kentucky (16-4, 6-2 Southeastern Conference). After missing a 3-pointer at the end of regulation, Grady regrouped in the extra session to drive the baseline for a layup before adding 3s with 2:23 and 1:13 remaining for an 80-74 lead.

"Sometimes it is crucial to see the ball go in once or twice," said Grady, who made 7 of 16 overall and 4 of 11 from long range. "I put my head down and drove and made the reverse layup, and then hit the next two 3s after that."

Calipari praised Grady's persistence, adding, "He missed four wide open shots, I told him to keep shooting the ball and we designed a play for him. He's shown he can miss some shots and come back."

Wheeler twice made the first of two free throws to extend the lead on the Bulldogs, whose only basket in overtime came from Iverson Molinar, a layup with 2:43 left.

The Wildcats led 53-38 with 12:25 left before the Bulldogs (13-6, 4-3) rallied by holding Kentucky scoreless over four minutes. Molinar scored 22 of his career-high 30 points in the second half to lead Mississippi State.

The Bulldogs were coming off a 78-60 rout of rival Mississippi on Saturday. They shot 62 percent in the second half to erase the deficit but made just 1 of 7 in overtime (14%) and missed a chance for their first victory in Rupp Arena since 2009.

"Really, really hard-fought game," Bulldogs coach Ben Howland said. "I like the way we fought back."

Wheeler had 15 points and six assists and Keion Brooks Jr. added 12 points and six rebounds for Kentucky, which played without guard TyTy Washington Jr. (left ankle).

"I wish we hadn't blown that lead, but I think it was good for us to show we can win a game like this," Grady said. "It shows we have some resilience."

Calipari remains just outside of the top 10 in career wins for Division I men's basketball, needing six to tie Eddie Sutton, who spent most of his career at Oklahoma State, but also had a four-season stint at Kentucky, among other schools.

Calipari amassed his 800 wins in the fourth-fewest games coached (1,037). Only Adolph Rupp (972), Roy Williams (1,012) and Dean Smith (1,029) achieved the feat faster.

Kentucky Wildcats after frustrating loss to No. 2 Auburn: 'We hope to see them again'

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Jan. 22

Another big road test for Kentucky, another maddening "incomplete" on the final grade. Just like the narrow loss at LSU on Jan. 4, injuries to point guard Sahvir Wheeler and freshman star TyTy Washington rendered Saturday's 80-71 defeat at second-ranked Auburn almost impossible to evaluate. Kentucky believes it would've won both of those games at full strength,

and that's hardly an outlandish opinion, but the official record says otherwise. Both go down as frustrating missed opportunities, annoying what-ifs.

Oscar Tshiebwe, who had 16 points, 14 rebounds, four blocks and two steals Saturday, agrees with Kellan Grady, who had 17 points and hit four 3-pointers against Auburn: "We hope to see them again." Why?

"I don't think they're better than us," Tshiebwe said. "I think we're going to beat them. I want to play them again. I want to see them."

But not without Washington, you don't. That's the one crystal clear takeaway from an otherwise asterisked result. The thing we know for sure about the Wildcats is they'll ultimately go only as far as Washington takes them. Consider this: Kentucky led 25-16 when Washington's floater dropped through the net with 8:20 to go in the first half, at which point a sold-out, salivating crowd at Auburn Arena was mighty quiet. They'd camped out in frigid temperatures to get in. They'd shown up in full force to get loud. Bruce Pearl's best team yet was hosting its biggest home game to date, and there was electricity in that building. Until there wasn't.

With Washington (and Wheeler) in the lineup, the Wildcats were getting whatever they wanted. Wheeler scored six consecutive points, Washington dropped a couple of feathery floaters through the net, and Kentucky turned six steals into points during those first dozen minutes. It looked like another statement game for the Cats, who'd hammered North Carolina on a neutral court and destroyed Tennessee at home but still lacked a marquee road win.

"I love how we started the game," coach John Calipari said. "We were the aggressor. We were the team that was really running some good stuff. Hated the end of the half. Hated it."

The end of the half, the final 28 minutes of the game, was played without Washington. He landed on Tshiebwe's foot at the end of that second floater in the lane, rolled his left ankle, limped off with some assistance and never returned. Auburn outscored Kentucky 64-46 after Washington's injury.

"TyTy is a playmaker for us, another scorer. He's our second-leading scorer. So in a big game like this, you take away 14 points per game, it's as simple as that," Grady said. "We've got other guys who are able to step up, but he made some nice plays in just those nine minutes that he was in there, and I think that could've helped us. But even with me mentioning that, that's not an excuse. We still had potential to win this game, and looking back, when we watch over the film, I think

we'll recognize that and we'll think this one slipped away."

To be sure, not everything about Saturday can be blamed on Washington's absence. Like 7-footer Walker Kessler torching Kentucky for 19 points on 8-of-10 shooting by simply standing under the basket and waiting for his man to abandon him so he could catch and dunk a lob. Seven dunks and one layup for Kessler accounted for all of his buckets. Then again, some of that can be traced to Washington's absence, because Auburn's guards blowing by perimeter defenders and drawing Tshiebwe's attention contributed to the conundrum.

Washington is a good defender, but he's been a great offensive weapon for the Wildcats. And there is just no question he was sorely missed Saturday.

"He's able to make plays for others," Grady said. "When you have multiple playmakers on the court and you've got finishers on the court, that makes the game easier. The thing about TyTy is he seemingly makes the right play almost every time. He's patient. He's just another playmaker. That obviously would've helped us."

Washington, a former five-star recruit, is the only freshman in the regular rotation for an atypically veteran Calipari team. It took him a while to get comfortable asserting himself, but the initial Wheeler injury at LSU helped unlock Washington. In his first game starting at point guard, he broke John Wall's single-game assist record with 17 dimes (and 17 points) in a rout of Georgia. Two games later, he dropped a career-high 28 points (on 13 shots) in a rout of Tennessee.

Washington is the only freshman in the country and one of just five high-major players averaging at least 14 points, 4.5 assists and 4.0 rebounds per game. He's shooting 50 percent from the field and 40 percent from 3-point range. Wheeler and Grady might lead the SEC in assists and 3-point percentage, respectively, and Tshiebwe might lead the nation in rebounding, but Washington is the single most important player on the roster.

"It hurts us," said Calipari, who provided no update after the game. "He's a playmaker. Whether he's on the ball, off the ball, whether we run stuff for him, if he needs to go get a basket, he gets it. We don't have those guys. Sometimes guys think they can do it and they're in this game and they can't do it. They'll say, 'Well, it's just ...' It's just what? And that's what (Washington) does for us. He goes and gets them."

Making matters worse Saturday — and even more precarious for the near future — was the fact Wheeler, who scored 17 points on 7-of-12 shooting, got decked (again) by a hard screen from a giant

human. This time, the 5-foot-9 Wheeler slammed into the 7-1, 245-pound Kessler with 11:28 to go. Even without Washington, Kentucky trailed by just a point when Wheeler hit that wall. Then his man drilled a 3-pointer and Wheeler, who missed two games with a neck injury after a similar collision at LSU, stayed down in a heap.

By the time he shook it off and re-entered the game three minutes later, the Wildcats were down by 10. They scratched back to within four points late, but Wheeler missed the final 1:14 after crashing into Kessler again.

"Worried about Sahvir," Calipari said. "I told him in the last four minutes, 'Why don't you just come out?' He said, 'No, I'm going to finish it.' At the end of the day, I'm coaching someone's child. If he can't play this week and TyTy can't play this week — if they're hurt, they can't play — now other guys have a chance to step up and show what they are or what they're not."

What no one else is — among the players we've seen so far — is TyTy Washington. Wheeler is important, especially if Washington can't go, but Washington is vital. He is the most complete player, the most balanced and efficient offensive threat, on the roster. Everyone else gets better looks in better spots when Washington is on the floor. The Wildcats average 122.2 points per 100 possessions with him, 105.4 without.

"Missing TyTy was big for us because he's got a lot of different game: attack the rim, shoot the midrange, finish at the rim, make a pass," Tshiebwe said. "I think after he got hurt, that really hurt us. We can do better things if everybody is healthy at the same time because we play as a team. If everybody is healthy on this team, it is a problem. I wish we had TyTy and Sahvir, both were good, (because) we could leave this place with a win today."

The question is how long Washington and Wheeler might be out — and what to do if one or both are going to miss significant time. The home game against a solid Mississippi State team Tuesday night won't be easy, but the trip to Kansas next week-end would be a nightmare with a short-handed backcourt.

There is, of course, an intriguing emergency option should Washington, Wheeler or both miss extended time: Shaedon Sharpe, the former No. 1 recruit in the Class of 2022, who graduated high school early and enrolled at Kentucky earlier this month. It remains unclear when or if he'll play for the Wildcats this season — or at all, after this week's news that he might be eligible for the next NBA Draft. Calipari said he didn't consider throwing Sharpe out there Saturday.

"It wouldn't have been fair to the kid,"

he said. "I just wish we had a bunch of practice time where I had two weeks with him to where we could run three or four different things — and him defensively play because he's a terrific player. But I have told his parents that I'm not going to put him in a position where he hurts himself. I'm not. We're going to do this, the process of this, (and) if he ends up playing this year because he's capable of doing it and he can play, we'll play him. But I'm not just shoving him in so we can win another game or stay close. I'm not going to do that."

If Washington and Wheeler sit for a while, Calipari said, it'll be up to Grady and super senior Davion Mintz, maybe even freshman wing Bryce Hopkins, to fill the void.

"The biggest thing for me is there are no excuses," Calipari said.

Without Washington, though, it's less an excuse than a fact: Kentucky can't come close to its maximum potential. There is no replacement. There is no more important piece. There's a lot that is still hard to know for certain about the Wildcats after another big road win slipped away while they were hobbled, but we at least know that one thing now. If Wheeler stirs the drink, as Calipari likes to say, Washington is the spirit that makes it go down smooth.

Why ugly Texas A&M win was more important for Kentucky basketball than Tennessee blowout

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal | Jan. 20

It would be difficult to post two more divergent offensive performances in back-to-back games than Kentucky basketball did in wins over Tennessee and Texas A&M.

In Saturday's blowout of Tennessee in Rupp Arena, Kentucky shot a scorching 67.9%. In Tuesday's come-from-behind win in College Station, the Wildcats tied a season-worst 36.2%.

Kentucky made 11 of 18 3s against Tennessee. It made 4 of 18 shots from long range at Texas A&M. Kentucky converted 20 of 21 free throws against the Volunteers then hit just 18 of 26 shots at the charity stripe against the Aggies.

One win was among the most aesthetically pleasing performances in program history. The other was the type of offensive showing that even those involved want to forget as quickly as possible.

Both the 107-79 blowout of Tennessee and 64-58 escape at Texas A&M were wins though. And the Texas A&M win might actually end up being more important for Kentucky in the long run.

"I love those games, just absolutely love them," Kentucky coach John Calipari said. "...That means you know you had to fight

and you had to guard, you had to rebound or you had no chance of winning."

If the domination of Tennessee proved Kentucky capable of beating a ranked foe, the ugly victory at Texas A&M showed the Wildcats could win in a hostile road environment and execute down the stretch of a close game.

Kentucky's only road win to date had come at Vanderbilt in front of a pro-Kentucky crowd. Texas A&M announced a Reed Arena-record crowd of 14,036 for Wednesday's game. On a "white out" night, the crowd was loud throughout, reaching peak volume as Texas A&M jumped out to a 13-point lead in the first half.

Still, Kentucky's veteran-heavy roster never folded. The Wildcats cut the lead to five by halftime then took their first lead with nine minutes left in the second half. A Jacob Toppin dunk with 6:19 remaining gave Kentucky the lead for good.

Given Big Blue Nation's propensity for traveling to postseason games, Kentucky will not have to worry about playing in front of a hostile crowd like Wednesday's in the NCAA Tournament, but if Calipari's team is to make a case for a No. 1 or No. 2 seed it will need to win its share of upcoming road games at No. 2 Auburn, No. 7 Kansas, Alabama and No. 25 Tennessee.

"You know that I try to tell them you take pride in this and know they're coming to see you," Calipari said. "They want to see you. Now, they may want to see you lose, but they want to watch you. Take pride in that."

Tennessee was supposed to be the test of whether a recent practice emphasis on late game execution would lead to better results, but Kentucky was so dominant in that win there was no drama for the entire second half.

Before Wednesday's win Kentucky's only close games had all ended in losses.

Kentucky trailed by four with five minutes remaining then lost by eight to Duke in the season opener. It led Notre Dame by one with 1:50 left and ended up losing by four. Kentucky had the ball down one at LSU with 21 seconds left before turnovers on consecutive possessions led to a five-point loss.

The final six minutes of the Texas A&M game was played within four points. Freshman TyTy Washington converted two key jumpers down the stretch to erase the bad taste of a 3-for-10 shooting night. Davion Mintz and Oscar Tshiebwe converted 3 of 4 free throws in the final 10 seconds to clinch the win.

Perhaps most importantly, even on a night where shots were not falling for Kentucky, the Wildcats held Texas A&M to 2-for-13 shooting in the final six minutes.

"That was SEC basketball tonight," Mintz said. "It was what it was. We learned a lot about ourselves. I'm just proud of this team that we stuck together because we've struggled a lot in the last four minutes. Just to know we finally got one under our belts in a tight crunch time, that's big for us and our confidence going forward in this league."

After handing Texas A&M its first SEC loss of the season, Kentucky can turn its full attention to Saturday's marquee at Auburn.

Bruce Pearl's team will be playing for a chance to take over the top spot in the top 25. Calipari's squad will look to prove it is actually the favorite to win the SEC title.

The eyes of the college basketball world will be pointed at Auburn Arena, giving Kentucky a chance to establish itself as a leading contender to win a national championship. It is far more likely the lessons learned in an ugly win Wednesday will be far more beneficial in that environment than the blowout of Tennessee.

"We walked into the locker room after the game and the first thing we said was, 'Way to stay together,'" Toppin said. "In a close game like this — the environment was crazy — for us to stay together when they went on their runs, it's big. It's big-time"

How Kentucky basketball program regained its 'swag' in blowout of Tennessee

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal | Jan. 15

Kentucky basketball freshman TyTy Washington knew something was special about the environment at Rupp Arena on Saturday even before the Wildcats' game against rival Tennessee had started.

Each time Washington and his teammates ran onto the court for the three sessions of pregame warmups, Washington noticed the crowd was growing. After playing a full semester of games against low-major opponents and opening Southeastern Conference play against two of the league's worst teams at home, Washington had grown used to many of the 20,000-plus seats at Rupp Arena remaining empty.

There were still some empty seats Saturday, but far fewer than in the 11 home games in which the actual scanned attendance did not exceed 14,000.

When super senior guard Kellan Grady drained consecutive 3s to help Kentucky open the game on a 14-5 run, Washington and company learned just exactly what a close-to-capacity crowd sounds like when Kentucky hosts a ranked rival in Rupp Arena.

"That was probably the best experience I've had, up there with Madison Square

Garden,” junior point guard Sahvir Wheeler said. “When we made that initial run to begin the game, my ears were popping. I was like, ‘Yo, this is loud.’ It was crazy. These fans that we have, they’re loyal, they’re supportive. They definitely help us in every single way.”

The early run was only a sign of things to come for No. 17 Kentucky on the way to a 107-79 blowout of the No. 23 Volunteers.

Kentucky held a moment of silence before the game to honor beloved former coach Joe B. Hall, who died in the early hours of Saturday morning, then fans made sure there were no more quiet moments in the first marquee home matchup since before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The roar grew as Kentucky matched a school record by hitting 78.6% of its shots in the first half. The opening run might have been the loudest moment of the day, but even as the Kentucky lead grew to 32 at one point in the second half, the crowd remained active.

“The crowd, they came in with a lot of intensity,” Washington said after posting a season-high 28 points on 10-of-13 shooting. “I just feel like we matched their intensity. Majority of the game they were standing up, screaming. We could just feel how electrifying it was not only to myself but everybody on the team. It just gives us a real confidence boost knowing that we’ve got a fan base behind us that believes in us.”

It was that environment that was missing from Rupp Arena a year ago when the pandemic forced a cap at 15% capacity for games. Kentucky went just 5-6 in the building on the way to an abysmal 9-16 season.

The Tennessee environment was new for Washington and his UK newcomers, but also for the second-year Wildcats like Davion Mintz, Lance Ware and Jacob Toppin. Of the current scholarship players, only junior forward Keion Brooks played in the last close-to-capacity Kentucky game against Tennessee on March 3, 2020.

“Last year was a throwaway year,” Kentucky coach John Calipari said Saturday. “... I feel so bad for the kids. They could not experience what Kentucky basketball is about. ... We were not what we wanted to be, but we never got any advantage here. None. It was playing like we were playing pickup.”

Fully enjoying the excitement of Saturday’s crowd requires a temporary suspension of understanding of the current state of the pandemic with cases soaring as the omicron variant spreads and much of the crowd ignoring the Rupp Arena masking requirement, but there is no question of the crowd’s effect on Kentucky’s performance.

The Wildcats posted their best performance of the season to land their first win

over a ranked foe. Gone is the criticism that Kentucky’s recent progress was simply the product of playing inferior opposition.

More difficult tests await, starting next week at Auburn against a Bruce Pearl-coached team could be ranked No. 1 in the country when the new polls are released Monday, but no team will be eager to face Kentucky after Saturday’s performance.

“I feel like we proved not only to other people but to ourselves that we can play with anybody in the country,” Washington said. “... We always feel like we can compete with the best of the best. I just feel like tonight we went out and showed that.”

Five of Kentucky’s next seven games will be played away from Rupp Arena. Each of the next three Saturdays will bring a road game against a team currently ranked in the top 25.

By the time Big Blue Nation gets another shot at a marquee Saturday game on Feb. 12 against Florida, the Wildcats could be in the hunt for a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament if the Tennessee game was a sign of things to come.

UK players have attributed the team’s surge since a December loss at Notre Dame to regaining their “swag” and playing with more confidence. After almost two years of small crowds and uninspiring basketball, Rupp Arena finally regained its swag on Saturday too.

“This is what it’s about,” Calipari said. “I want these kids to experience this. That’s why you come here. Our fans are the biggest part. Now, some people try to steer the fans, but at the end of the day, they’re Kentucky basketball fans. You’re not going to turn them off.”

‘He upheld the tradition’: Joe B. Hall kept Kentucky on top while coaching in the shadow of a legend

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Jan. 15

The lasting image of Joe B. Hall — the one cast in bronze for a life-sized statue on the University of Kentucky’s campus and painted on a 30-foot-tall mural that watches over his hometown of Cynthia, Ky. — is a serious and bespectacled man in suit and tie with a rolled-up game program clenched in his right fist like a baton he is determined not to drop. If he sometimes seemed too solemn, too harsh, too tightly wound, it was only because he’d taken that baton from the legendary Adolph Rupp, and it was heavier than he ever dreamed. For the 13 years he coached the Wildcats after Rupp, from 1972 until 1985, Hall felt the constant weight of what he considered a sacred obligation: to not just secure the baton but carry it forward.

At the time, most folks were skeptical. How could a man who played for Rupp,

coached under Rupp and then replaced Rupp possibly carve out his own legacy in Lexington? Well, like this: Hall won eight SEC championships, reached three Final Fours and won the 1978 national championship. He also wasted no time doing what Rupp either could not or would not, fully integrating the program by hiring its first Black assistant coach and filling his roster with Black players. Hall was also among the first coaches in the sport to establish a serious strength training program, he led the charge to build Kentucky’s first basketball dorm — his statue now sits in front of the newest version — and he created a fan-friendly preseason event that took on a life of its own, complete with a days-long campout, known today as Big Blue Madness.

Hall, whose contributions ensured that Kentucky would be not just a one-coach program but a blue blood built to last, died Saturday. He was 93. Among the many visitors who celebrated his final birthday at a nursing home last month was John Calipari, the fifth coach to win a national title at UK. Hall died knowing the baton was still in capable hands.

“I think he would be most proud that people believe he did all he ever wanted to do: He upheld the tradition,” former All-American Kyle Macy says. “He loved Kentucky basketball ever since he was a little kid, and he just wanted to know that he had a hand in keeping it great.”

The irony of the way we remember Hall on the sidelines, as a man hardened by unimaginable pressure, is he abandoned that persona completely in his moment of truth. He did not mimic his mentor. He did not squeeze that poor scroll of sweaty paper to a pulp. No, minutes before the biggest game of his life, the ‘78 championship game against Duke, Hall slipped off his suit jacket, loosened his tie and dragged a garbage can into the middle of Kentucky’s locker room. He climbed in, sat down, crossed his eyes, stuck out his tongue and then pulled the bag up over his head. Players stared at each other, mouths agape, in silent disbelief. Their hard-driving coach had finally cracked. They expected Knute Rockne and got Oscar the Grouch instead.

“He’s lost his mind,” Macy remembers thinking.

In fact, Hall knew exactly what he was doing. Those Wildcats had marched military-style, eyes forward and expressionless, toward that championship game for months. It was a stoic pursuit that had been called a season without celebration — or fun, or joy, depending on who was describing their stress-filled slog. Only one outcome was acceptable that year, and everyone knew it. Kentucky was loaded, led by a senior class that made the title game in 1975, won the NIT in 1976 and reached

a region final in 1977. Six years after replacing Rupp, who won four NCAA championships, Hall had yet to win the big one himself. Come back empty-handed again, and there would be a long line of people ready to help him back into the trash can.

As if that weight wasn't suffocating enough, the third-place game in '78 ran long. The Wildcats found themselves stuck in their locker room trying to take deep breaths and unclench their jaws, among other things. Hall himself had been so spun-up that he nearly entered the Blue Devils' locker room by mistake. He'd given some spectacular pregame and halftime speeches in his time, but Hall sensed the mood and simplified this one. He sacked himself. After a few awkward beats, uproarious laughter filled the room, then Hall stood up from the garbage and gave his final order: Let's go win this.

"We had been waiting and waiting and waiting," remembers Jack Givens, who scored 41 points that night when Hall turned the Goose loose against Duke's zone. "The tension was really thick, and the pressure was building up in that room. We didn't need a whole lot of coaching in that moment. Joe had us totally prepared — he always did — and he knew that. We needed to laugh. We needed to relax. We needed to break the tension. When Joe got in the trash can, the rest was history. I've told him many times that was his best coaching job ever."

Givens doesn't just mean that final game. He means that entire NCAA Tournament. The defining run of Hall's career could've ended in the first round, after all. Down seven to Florida State at halftime, Hall peeled paint in the locker room, where he also kicked over a bucket of water and soaked the team trainer, then benched All-Americans Givens, Rick Robey and senior guard Truman Claytor. He replaced them with three guys who'd barely played all year, the same trio he'd left behind when they were late to the bus for shootaround at Ole Miss. Naturally, they sparked a comeback.

"That took some courage," Macy says, "because if that had backfired, it could've easily cost him his job."

But every button Hall pushed that season seemed to be the right one. When he didn't like the energy before a regional final against Magic Johnson and Michigan State, he quickly scribbled something on the chalkboard: 40-40-40 — 120. Three 40-minute games left to win it all, 120 minutes to achieve the dream. "That's two hours of work," Hall told them. "You can do anything for two hours." The day before a national semifinal against Arkansas, he fell to the floor and clucked like a chicken in front of the team. So maybe they weren't

that shocked by the trash can stunt. Even in those rare moments of brevity, though, Hall never let the Wildcats forget their mission. He wrote "40" on the blackboard before that championship game and reminded them history was just around the corner. "Forty minutes to glory," he told them.

"He knew what he had to do to get us ready," Givens says. "He knew the players who could handle his wrath and those who couldn't. He let the situation dictate his approach. There's a whole lot more to coaching than what a guy does during the 40 minutes of the game on the court, and Joe was very good at all phases."

While it's true that Hall had a great feel for exactly what his team needed from him on a given day, it's also true that, like Rupp, he believed the primary need was discipline. He had no qualms about suspending stars for missing curfew and once famously sat all night in a player's dorm after discovering him missing. After the second (and final) loss of the championship season on Feb. 11, by a point in overtime at LSU, Hall called his team "The Folding Five" and "The Quitting Quintet," barbs that played on nicknames for Rupp's greatest groups. He openly criticized players by name and questioned whether Givens wanted the ball in pressure situations. He later admitted it was all a motivational tactic.

"He was very hard and very demanding, really pushed and changed you," Macy says. "He tried to break you down and build you back up the way he wanted. As you get older and get to know him away from the court, you appreciate what he did and how he made you better as a player and person."

Givens puts it a little differently.

"I didn't like him as a coach," he says, laughing. "He learned that from Rupp, who didn't want his players to like him. But now, Coach Hall is a father and a grandfather to those of us who played for him, because he mellowed as the years went by. He mellowed because he no longer had to be the man carrying the weight of Kentucky basketball."

Hall had grown up the son of a sheriff, a Boy Scout, an usher at Kentucky games, class president and captain of his high school basketball team. An overachiever. But after playing for Rupp's freshman team in 1948, he couldn't get off the bench as a sophomore in 1949, when four of Rupp's Fabulous Five returned to repeat as national champs, so he transferred to Sewanee and became a captain, then toured with the Harlem Globetrotters. His coaching career began at Shepherdsville High School, then Regis College in Denver, then Central Missouri State, before he came home to be an assistant on Rupp's staff from 1965-72.

He became Kentucky's recruiting ace, helping sign All-Americans Dan Issel, Mike Pratt and Kevin Grevey.

"I have a worthy successor," Rupp said at the time. "I told him for 42 years that if the basketball program fails at the University of Kentucky, then I have built it on a sand foundation."

No pressure, Joe. Some context: Rupp didn't really want to leave. He was forced into retirement because it was mandatory at the time for university employees when they reached the age of 70. The transfer of power might've been peaceful, but it was not pleasant. Rupp did not vacate his office at Memorial Coliseum right away. In fact, he seemed to be lingering quite deliberately.

"So Joe initially went to work in this little cubby hole on the other end of the building," remembers Ralph Hacker, who knows something about the enormous task of replacing a mentor and legend. Hacker started calling freshman games on radio when Hall was coaching that team for Rupp. He eventually became Cawood Ledford's sidekick, then replaced the famous voice of the Wildcats as play-by-play announcer in 1992. He learned a few things from Hall's transition. "It was such tension," Hacker says, "because if you went over there and spoke to Coach Rupp, the Coach Hall people didn't speak to you. If you spoke to Coach Hall, the Coach Rupp people didn't speak to you. I remember saying to Joe back then, 'You'll be thought of a lot more when you retire than you are now.' He never got credit at the time for all the great things he did, recruiting and coaching and changing the game of basketball. Nobody thought much about it then just because they hated that he wasn't Adolph Rupp."

As if that shadow wasn't already large enough, Rupp died in the middle of Hall's championship chase. The day after his passing, on Dec. 11, 1977, according to Sports Illustrated, Hall said this of the relationship:

"As a player, I lived in fear of Adolph Rupp, the fear that I would fail him. That helped me when I took over as coach because I was under unbelievable pressure then. There was no halfway for me. I'd either fail totally or carry on the winning tradition of Kentucky basketball."

When John Wooden had retired at UCLA in 1975, after beating Hall and Kentucky for his 10th national championship in 12 seasons, Hall joked that the Bruins should've hired him.

"Why ruin two lives?" he said. Gene Bartow lasted two seasons as Wooden's replacement and said later, "I didn't have a lot of fun." Bartow also said that no one has ever followed an all-time great coach

better than Hall.

“He loved representing the University of Kentucky with all of his heart and with all of his soul. In every conversation, he held the integrity of the basketball program and the respect and affection for the fans in very high esteem,” says Florida State coach Leonard Hamilton, whom Hall hired in 1974 as UK’s first Black assistant. “Coach Rupp was such a beloved figure, it was going to take someone whose total being was immersed in representing Kentucky basketball, who loved it more than anything in this world. Joe was that guy. Joe was the only guy who could’ve done it. Joe is the reason that program is where it is today.”

There is a never-ending debate about why Rupp only signed one Black player in his career — Tom Payne, who played a single season at Kentucky and did not debut until 1970, three years after the SEC’s first Black basketball player and four years after the Wildcats integrated their football team — but there is no question about this: Hall deserves the credit for making actual change. He signed Reggie Warford in 1972, Larry Johnson and Merion Haskins in 1973, Givens and James Lee in 1974, Claytor and Dwane Casey in 1975. Seven Black scholarship players on the roster, plus Hamilton on his staff, by the end of his fourth season. Givens, a Lexington native, figures he would not have played for Kentucky had Rupp remained.

“Coach Hall was his own man on that issue,” Givens says. “He stepped outside of the way it had been and took a big chance. He went out of his way to ruffle a lot of feathers by making the move to bring in more diverse staff and players, but it kind of set the stage and defined what Kentucky basketball is now.”

To hear friends tell it, Hall softened after his abrupt retirement in 1985, following an NCAA Tournament loss in Denver, where he explained that he didn’t want to be “an old coach.” He was just 56 but ready to lay down that burden. It might be the only reason he’s not in the Naismith Hall of Fame. Hall, who is in the College Basketball Hall of Fame, won 75 percent of his games at Kentucky and went 373-156 overall as a college head coach, but 13 years at the Division I level is a relatively short run. There is also the matter of an NCAA probation, which resulted in a loss of scholarships, on his watch. That issue compounded the next one, under Eddie Sutton, which nearly wiped out the program. But good luck finding one of his former players who doesn’t believe Hall belongs in the Hall.

“I don’t think there’s any doubt,” Givens says. “I don’t know that people thought he would last a year, let alone 13 years, and I’m not sure you could’ve followed Adolph Rupp any better than he did.”

“Coach Hall transitioned the program into a new era,” former All-American Kenny Walker says. “To follow a legend and carry the program forward at such a high level, I don’t understand how that isn’t appreciated as one of the great achievements in basketball. When I came to Kentucky, basketball players just didn’t lift weights and train their bodies the way Coach Hall had us doing. He was way ahead of his time on that, way ahead of his time in so many things that just weren’t really done yet back then.”

It is true that Hall was a kinder, gentler man in retirement. He even hosted a radio show with longtime Louisville coach and rival Denny Crum. They’d tangled in the 1983 Dream Game, which sent Crum and the Cardinals to the Final Four and created enough political pressure in the state to force Hall and the Cats to begin an annual series. But from 2004-2014, the pair yucked it up on air about their favorite foods and fishing holes, telling nostalgic tales full of fuzzy details. It was like sitting around the local diner with two folksy old friends. Hall did that a lot, too, in his later years. There was a time when 25-plus people, many of them former players, would flock to the cafe at Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington for lunch with Joe B. Most mornings, a handful of his closest confidants, sometimes including Calipari, gathered around the counter at Wheeler Pharmacy for breakfast with the great storyteller.

One of Calipari’s first moves upon taking the job in 2009 was to embrace Hall and introduce him to a whole new generation of Kentucky fans. Over time, appreciation for his contributions have grown, and it buoyed Hall in his final years. The oncestern coach could not stop smiling toward the end. Unless you asked him about Bob Knight.

Perhaps Hall’s greatest victory of all came not in 1978, but three years prior, when the Wildcats were runners-up in ’75. Earlier that season, Indiana had blown out Kentucky in Bloomington, and Knight, a friend until that very moment, added injury to insult by slapping Hall in the back of the head. A few months later, Hall got a karmic gift from the universe: a rematch with the undefeated Hoosiers for a trip to the Final Four. It would be Hall’s first. Before the game, as players awaited their pregame speech, Hall wrote just four words on the chalkboard.

Nets!

Bus!

Police!

Coliseum!

Then he told them, very matter-of-factly, not to cut themselves when they snipped the nets later. He told them not to miss the bus ride back from Dayton, Ohio, to Lexington, where Kentucky State Police would meet them at the border and escort them all the way back to Memorial Coliseum. There, he said, fans would “pack that place for the largest and longest celebration of a win in the history of Kentucky basketball.” Joe B. Hall, always pushing those buttons. His inspired team fulfilled the prophecy that day, beating Indiana 92-90, earning a special place in the history of a special place. The Herald-Leader recently ranked it the program’s greatest victory of all-time.

“A most pleasurable memory. Number one, easily. Oh, my God, I about lost my mind, I was so happy,” Hall told The Athletic on the 45th anniversary of denying the Hoosiers a perfect season. When it came to Knight, he never mellowed. “I wouldn’t piss up his ass if his bowels were on fire,” a then-91-year-old Hall said. Some habits are hard to kick. But the same year, when he sat down for an hour-long conversation with Calipari for a TV special called “Legend to Legend,” Hall was in a much more reverent, reflective mood. He’d loved Kentucky basketball since he was knee-high to a short pony, he reckoned. And so Calipari wondered, then, what he hoped his legacy would be.

“That Joe Hall came up here from Cynthiana, took over this program and kept it where it should be,” Hall said. “That’s all I wanted to do.”

So perhaps this is what ought to be the lasting image of Joe B. Hall at Kentucky: a photo from the night he won it all in 1978, snapped from the baseline as Hall reached up toward a dangling net to snip his piece. There is no frown, no furrowed brow. His face isn’t awash in worry anymore. What’s that there? Hall appears to be ... smiling? You might think he was finally ready to relax, if it wasn’t for that rolled-up program, like a baton, clinched as tightly as ever in his fist.

Kentucky’s Kellan Grady stands tall on the shoulders of his grandparents: ‘Give a voice to the suffering’

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Jan. 13

For the first seven years of her life, Kellan Grady’s mother did not know her own father, except in pictures and stories. Everyone said he was a good man who, for reasons she was not equipped to comprehend, needed to disappear. When she finally met him, after being smuggled out of her home country with her mother

and brother, leaving behind a furnished home and their car in the driveway, he lived 1,000 miles away under an assumed identity. Even the relief of their reunion was short-lived, because who can relax when the family dogs are trained to sniff out bombs? One did, by the way, that time someone hid an explosive device under their vehicle.

“These things must sound so bizarre to people now,” says Danielle Grady, Kellan’s mom, “but this was commonplace in those days. Our lives were in danger. We had been infiltrated by spies. Some of our own comrades were working for the intelligence apparatus back home, where the regime was very busy intimidating and oppressing our people.”

There was constant fear of imprisonment or attack. Whenever Danielle’s father got reports of serious and imminent threats, the family hunkered down for the night — or a few — in a safe house. They could not practice their Catholic faith, because attending a public Mass seemed too big a risk. They had friends who opened boobytrapped packages and lost limbs, or worse.

“And this is how we lived,” says Kellan’s grandmother, Sophia Williams-De Bruyn. “Always on the lookout.”

It is a harrowing, heroic family history, one that informs who Kellan Grady is and what he would like to become. More than the 2,000-point scorer at Davidson, where he got to be texting buddies with alumnus and NBA superstar Steph Curry. More than his current status as the SEC’s most accurate 3-point shooter at Kentucky, where he transferred to prove he can play in the pros too. His grandmother is incredibly proud of him, obviously, but it has almost nothing to do with basketball. She rarely even sees him play because his games aren’t televised where she lives.

Grady’s maternal grandparents — Williams-De Bruyn and her late husband, Henry De Bruyn (aka Benny Nato) — are among the more influential couples in the history of South Africa. They were close confidants of Nelson Mandela, key figures in his African National Congress. They risked their lives, jeopardized their freedom and separated their family to fight a decades-long war against apartheid, which by law elevated the country’s White minority in both society and government, and subjugated the nonwhite majority.

Forgive Grady’s grandmother, then, if she skips the highlights of that recent game against High Point in which he swished seven 3-pointers. There are serious matters still on her mind. She’s more interested in the video from August 2020, when her grandson stood eye-to-eye with a white supremacist at an anti-racism demonstra-

tion near Davidson’s campus and refused to back down. The man, wearing a TRUST JESUS shirt, called Grady a “Black thug.” Grady stepped forward with a word of advice: “Watch your f—ing mouth.”

To be clear, Williams-De Bruyn is deeply disturbed that, despite her own personal sacrifice and an even greater cost to so many others, her grandchildren still live in a world where such prejudice and hate exist. But if the fight must go on, if racism is will continue to rear its ugly head, she is comforted at least to know that her descendants will take their place on the frontlines. That same summer, after the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and in the midst of nationwide protests in the U.S., Grady launched a social justice initiative called College Athletes for Respect and Equality, or CARE. The goal is for well-known athletes to use their platform to educate elementary school children in their communities on racial inequality by reading books to them from an age-appropriate curriculum.

“My heart bursts with pride and joy,” his grandmother says. “I was not really surprised, because it sort of runs in the family, but it was very heartwarming. Yes, yes, a very proud moment for us. I wish I could be there to encourage him, but even in my older age, I’m still carrying on with the work here in South Africa.”

To get CARE up and running while finishing a sociology degree and playing high-level basketball, Grady partnered with the founder of a Holocaust-education institute, a woman he met during a team trip to Poland two years earlier. The seeds of his own activism took root there. While most of his Davidson teammates toured Auschwitz, Grady sat for hours with a Holocaust survivor who impressed upon him the horrors of that place and the importance of remembering the ugliest parts of our past, lest we repeat them.

The message spoke to his soul, touched something in his DNA, connected with what sometimes feels like a do-the-right-thing gene passed down from Oumie, as he calls Williams-De Bruyn, and the grandfather he never met — but Pope John Paul II did — a rebel soldier turned global ambassador for the country he helped remake.

“We always had an idea that both my mother’s parents were notable figures,” Grady says, “but as we got older and as our country here started to kind of revert back to a lot of racism and discrimination, it came to the forefront of family discussions. The last three or four years, I’ve really gotten a better understanding of how significant both my grandparents were, and it puts things in perspective sometimes when you think you’re having a tough day or life isn’t as easy as you’d hoped or you feel

grief about the way the world is. What are you going to do to help change it? When I started CARE, it was really about taking my frustrations and figuring out, OK, how do we channel this into something productive and not just be another person on the outskirts complaining?”

His grandmother, who turns 84 this month, led a group of 20,000 people on the Women’s March in Pretoria in 1956 to protest the country’s pass laws. One of the most oppressive features of apartheid, pass laws were a race-based passport system that restricted the movements of nonwhite citizens. While they marched, the protestors sang a freedom song: When you strike a woman, you strike a rock! The date of that march, Aug. 9, is now recognized as National Women’s Day in South Africa. Williams-De Bruyn, who was just 18 that day, is immortalized with multiple statues and at least one major road named after her. Today, in a nation that cast her out for more than two decades, the last living leader of Women’s March is widely and affectionately known as “Aunty Sophie.”

She earned the love by enduring so much hate. She witnessed the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, when another pass-law protest turned tragic. Police opened fire on the crowd, killing 69 people and wounding 186 more. Some were children. Many were shot in the back.

In response to that tragedy, Mandela co-founded the uMkhonto we Sizwe, which means “Spear of the Nation,” and was the armed wing of the ANC, to fight back. Henry De Bruyn joined up. When Mandela and a number of liberation leaders were arrested for treason and sentenced to life in prison in 1963, Henry fled the country as Benny Nato. He later became the ANC’s chief representative in Italy, where there is today a Benny Nato Center for anti-racism in Rome, and eventually South Africa’s ambassador to Jordan until his death in 1999. In exile, his wife worked as an administrator for the ANC, earned a teaching degree and then served on the ANC Education Council. When the ANC was unbanned and Mandela was released from prison in 1990 — apartheid legislation was repealed in ‘91, and Mandela was elected president in ‘94 — Williams-De Bruyn returned home to South Africa, where her activism continues even now.

She is tired, but she is not quite finished with “the work,” as she constantly refers to the pursuit of equality. She’s writing an autobiography, which she hopes will serve as a guide to some and warning to others.

“The racism that still exists, the abuse of one another, has really been eating away at even our health,” she says of her dwindling generation. “Because as we are aging, it does not sit well in our psyche to see what

is happening. It is very, very painful. Very painful. We just hope and pray, and I often speak to the younger generation here in South Africa, urging them to take over the baton that we've handed them. Because it is them that must be running with that baton and see that they are the ones who are going to bring the country back. It is dependent on the new generation in every country where there is abuse to uplift those people. We don't have the strength anymore. We don't have anything much except our minds and our thoughts, asking them to carry on the struggle for the future generation, for their own grandchildren."

To his Kentucky teammates, 24-year-old Kellan Grady hardly qualifies as a member of the younger generation. Even on the most experienced roster John Calipari has ever assembled in Lexington, Grady is the old man, in both age and action. He is six years older than midseason enrollee Shaedon Sharpe. Guys have taken to calling him "Granddad," a nickname that has stuck so hard freshman guard TyTy Washington doesn't even bother using Grady's real name anymore in interviews. It's just Granddad.

"Oddly enough, that's a name I embrace," Grady says. "In part, it's them busting my chops, but there's also a bit of reverence for the fact that I've played four years of college basketball and I have some real-life experience. They all say I'm an old soul. They see me do things maybe they don't, keeping up with the news of the day, following politics, looking at real estate. I think about how, when I was going to kindergarten, some of these guys were not even walking yet. So I guess it's true, compared to them, I am an old soul. But I just try to be the best person I can be, bring a joyful energy to the locker room and help the guys when they need it."

The most old-man thing about him, besides the fact teammates often ask him to look over their name, image and likeness contracts and the related NCAA compliance paperwork?

"My wardrobe," he says without hesitation, plus an aversion to both video games and viral videos.

"Sometimes they'll be like, 'You really are a granddad,' because I do not give a crap about TikTok," Grady says. "I get the fascination to some degree, but it just wouldn't consume my day. When guys reference things that are trending on social media or a new TikTok dance, I just have no idea what they're talking about. Because frankly, I just really don't care."

Here's another thing: He chose Kentucky precisely because he would have a smaller role than at Davidson, where he averaged 13.5 field-goal attempts and 17.4 points per game over four years. He was

the No. 1 option there. With the Wildcats, he often takes a backseat to Washington or SEC assist leader Wheeler or NCAA rebound leader Oscar Tshiebwe. Through 16 games at UK, he is averaging averaged 8.6 field-goal attempts and 11.6 points. And guess what? He's loving it.

"I struggled pretty heavily at the beginning, just the speed of the game, learning how to make quick, assertive decisions every time you touch the ball," he admits, "but seeing how I've improved and improved and really belong now, it's evident to me this was the right decision. It's important to hit some adversity and see how you do. There's no better place than Kentucky to step in the ring and find out how long you can last. I've always been one of the best players or clearly the focal point on my team, but I wanted to play my last college season with a lot of other great players. It's imperative for me, because at the next level, as a pro, you're going to have to find a way to be good at a role, to be effective when your team has a depth of options."

Grady has been a quick study. During the Wildcats' recent four-game winning streak, when they waxed North Carolina, Western Kentucky and Missouri, Grady caught fire and turbo-charged the offense. He hit 20 of 31 3-pointers, scored 18-plus three times, and UK averaged 92 points per game. Suddenly, he looks like Calipari's most reliable marksman since Doron Lamb set the single-season school record for 3-point percentage in 2011. Grady has a shot at breaking it.

"Kellan always rises to the occasion," his father, Rob, says. "He has great heart, and I think those pressure situations are where he's at his best. Kentucky was the exact right place for him. He made a very wise decision. But that is what he's always done, just very logically and methodically made good choices."

It helps to have such profoundly successful role models. His grandmother won the Mahatma Gandhi Award, for crying out loud. His mother studied international humanitarian law in Moscow — and did so in Russian — then earned the same degree in English at American University in Washington, D.C., where she met Rob, who is now a commercial real estate executive in Boston. Danielle Grady also studied international diplomacy at Oxford and then served as the consulate general, or chief diplomat, for South Africa on America's West Coast. She speaks a half-dozen languages, in part because her family stayed on the move during her formative years.

"I was literally referred to as an alien," she says. "There's a lot of trauma in that, because you don't really have a home. You're country to country, always on the

margins, having to hear about the beauty of South Africa from people who've visited, but you can't go back there unless you want to land and go straight to jail. For the longest time, when my children were younger, I tried to protect them from the horror of it. They understood that we come from a line of freedom fighters. We took them to South Africa to see where my mother marched. We spared them some of the gruesome details, but they've always known where they're from and who they are, and I think it has driven them, in many respects, and formed their own outlook on life."

Kellan's older brother, Liam, became a Boston police officer. His paternal grandfather, Bob Grady, served in the Navy during World War II and earned an MBA from Dartmouth, where he ran track, and retired as the president of a shoe company. He was a history buff who shared his love of learning with the grandkids before his death in 2015. Danielle's lasting memory of her father-in-law is actually her first impression. The day Rob introduced them, Bob, a White man, saw Danielle, a Black woman, cleaning her boots — so he dropped to a knee and shined her shoes himself. Given the world she grew up in, "I was very touched by that."

"We are talking a lot about my family," Danielle says, "but their father's father definitely left an imprint on my kids too. I tell my children that I've met Nelson Mandela, an amazing man and world hero, but Bob Grady was like an unsung hero. He had the character of my father, the same morality and integrity, and was just an understated, brilliant man. I don't know anyone that intelligent."

Kellan Grady is a strong case that both IQ and EQ, or emotional intelligence, are genetic. Not that it matters much, the debate over nature vs. nurture in this case, because he got the benefit of both. He was born and raised into a family whose motto is essentially: know better, do better.

"He's always had kind of an instinct to stick up for people, even as a little kid," Rob Grady says. "He was a strong, dynamic person already as a second-grader, so he'd stick up for the ones who needed it. It's a character trait that makes me extremely proud of him, beyond his athletic ability — and he's always been a really good athlete. To see him grow as a person into somebody who thinks about social justice the way he does and tries to live a life that benefits others, what more can you ask for?"

The COVID-19 pandemic slowed down Grady's big plans for getting CARE into more schools while at Davidson, and his transfer to Kentucky, where it felt like he was trying to jump aboard a fast-moving

train, have so far stalled the program's introduction in Lexington.

"Regrettably, honestly," he says. "I don't think I've taken advantage of what this platform can do. But at the end of the season, when things calm down and guys have a little more free time, we're going to leave an impact on a school or two here in Kentucky. With the influence we have on the whole state as part of this basketball program, we could do wonders."

His grandmother could not agree more. Her son, Angelo, a doctor, does his part by providing care to marginalized people who cannot afford to pay him. If there's not one giant extinguisher for the seemingly endless flame of injustice, maybe a few million feet can stamp it out one flare-up at a time.

"You don't need to be a politician. You don't need to stand on a podium and make speeches," Williams-De Bruyn says. "You can fight your own way. Dedicate your life to the people who have no way of helping themselves. Speak for those who cannot speak. Write for those who cannot write. Do it in their name, give a voice to their suffering."

It is exhausting, Danielle Grady admits, to endure all that her family has and now, 31 years after she greeted Mandela's plane upon his release from prison, watch racism making a comeback across the globe.

"But you can fold your arms," she says, "or you can do what our children are doing. It's a continuous battle, and it is exactly what my mother would like for her grandchildren to be doing. It's sad that you still have to, yes, but fighting racism all over the world is what we've been doing our whole lives. It's what my parents did before me, what I was born into, and what I hope is important to the next generation. It is their turn now."

'TyTy was amazing.' Washington breaks Wall's UK assists record in win vs. Georgia

By Jerry Tipton | Lexington Herald-Leader-Jan. 9

In a relief role that figures to reverberate for a long time, freshman Ty Ty Washington did more than set a Kentucky record with 17 assists in leading the way to a 92-77 victory over Georgia on Saturday night.

He gained a nickname.

That the person inspired to give him a nickname was the player he filled in for so admirably made it seem all the more significant. That person was point guard Sahvir Wheeler. "The guy who stirs the drink for us," Coach John Calipari had said a day earlier.

"After the game, he just started calling

me 'PG1,'" Washington said. Then as if speaking in Wheeler's voice, he added, "I don't need to come back. You've got it under control. You're 'PG1.'"

"He was super excited for me."

Kentucky's depth charge included its other drink stirrer, too.

Oscar Tshiebwe, who earlier this season set a Rupp Arena record with 28 rebounds, found a new way to make his mark. He scored a career-high 29 points while also grabbing 17 rebounds.

Kentucky improved its records to 12-3 overall and 2-1 in the Southeastern Conference.

Georgia, which fell to 5-10, seemed a less imposing opponent to test UK's adaptability. A media poll, plus preseason magazines like Athlon, Lindy's and Blue Ribbon all picked the Bulldogs to finish last in the Southeastern Conference.

Wheeler sustained a neck injury when he ran blindly into a screen less than four minutes into UK's game at LSU on Tuesday. His status for Saturday's game was in doubt. Washington, also sidelined for part of the LSU game by cramps, sensed he might be called upon to be Kentucky's point guard.

"I had a feeling he wasn't going to play because there's no need for him to rush back," Washington said. "This team had good depth. So, if he goes down, the next man steps up. That's what I feel I did."

Washington broke the Kentucky record set by John Wall, the first in a long line of standout point guards who have played for Calipari-coached UK teams.

"It excites me," Washington said. "It's John Wall. I've watched him play. I've watched a bunch of his highlights at Kentucky."

Washington said he was unaware of the possibility of breaking the record as the game entered its final minutes. A staffer tried to tell him during a timeout, he said.

"I was walking out of the huddle, so I didn't even know what he was saying," Washington said. "Once I got close ... all my teammates were telling me, like, yo, you need two more to get the record."

Calipari said he was unaware of the record. But if he had known, he said he might have tried to help a player set that kind of record.

"If it's points, I'd probably take somebody out," the UK coach said. "If you're talking assists or rebounds, I don't mind leaving a guy in. "But the game will dictate. If you're up 30, I'm not doing that ... at the expense of the other coach and their program."

Calipari led 40-37 at the end of a competitive first half that saw 10 lead changes and neither team leading by more than six points. Tshiebwe had already clinched his

11th double-double. He had 12 points and 10 rebounds in the opening half. The lead among Division I players is 12 (Fardaws Aimaq of Utah Valley).

UK made eight of its first nine shots of the second half to twice assume its largest lead to that point: 57-45 with 15:27 left and then 60-48 at the 14:13 mark.

The possibility of a Georgia comeback faded when Davion Mintz hit a floater and then Tshiebwe rose for an offensive rebound on Mintz's miss from three-point range and dunked before gravity brought him back to the floor. The crowd roared its approval.

Calipari said that Washington and Wheeler play the point guard position differently. On offense, Wheeler can be a one-man fast break rushing the ball up the court. Washington is more inclined to pass it ahead, the UK coach said.

Wheeler noted the difference on defense during halftime, Calipari said. "He stood and said, listen guys, our game is pressuring people and getting into their legs."

Mintz, who played a bit of point guard in relief of Washington, saluted the freshman. Washington had only two turnovers in almost 37 minutes of play.

"TyTy was amazing," Mintz said. "... It just made everything easy. ...

"No one knew how many assists, the score. I didn't know how many points I had. We were just playing. When we got in a rhythm like that where we're just naturally hooping and not thinking. When we play like that, with that mentality, things that happened today happen. Guys get career highs."

Washington and Wheeler usually play together. Each has point guard responsibilities, Calipari said.

When asked if Wheeler will play Tuesday at Vanderbilt, Calipari said, "if he practices Monday, he'll be available for the game on Tuesday."

Why Jacob Toppin might be the key to Keion Brooks finding his consistency

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal | Dec. 30

This is the story of Keion Brooks' Kentucky basketball career.

Just when you think John Calipari's latest not-so-subtle public criticism of Brooks' inconsistency might actually be the sign the junior forward's time in the spotlight is coming to an end, he posts a performance like Wednesday's blowout of Missouri.

Brooks scored UK's first points with a put-back layup then added a jumper in the 7-0 run to open the game. By the time Kentucky had closed out its 83-56 win in the

Southeastern Conference opener, Brooks had amassed a team-high 17 points to go with nine rebounds.

“What I’ve done is I’m holding him to a high standard that I think he’s capable of reaching,” Calipari said. “But you got to fight, you got to play with spirit. When the ball doesn’t go in, it can’t affect the rest of your game. If it does, you’re out and Jacob (Toppin) is in. But if he plays, we’re pretty good.”

Brooks’ Kentucky track record suggests calling the Missouri performance a breakout would be premature. The Wildcats have fallen into that trap too often before.

The first Brooks breakout was supposed to have come just more than two years ago when he posted back-to-back double-digit scoring performances against Fairleigh Dickinson and Georgia Tech as a freshman, but two games later he failed to score against Ohio State and reached double figures just twice more in the regular season.

When Brooks returned from a nine-game absence with a leg injury to start his sophomore season with 12 points, six rebounds and four assists in a win over Florida, he was supposed to have turned a corner. Instead, he was hardly immune to the Kentucky’s team-wide struggles on the way to a 9-16 season.

Even this season we have already wondered if Brooks had finally broken out for good when he followed a 22-point, eight-rebound performance against Ohio with 17 points and eight rebounds three days later against Albany. But then Brooks was limited to two points and one rebound in 20 minutes against Southern. Last week, he played just 13 minutes with five points and one rebound against Western Kentucky.

Meanwhile, Toppin looked on his way to staking a claim to the starting four spot with 12 points, three rebounds and six assists in 24 minutes against the Hilltoppers.

“My confidence can wane from time to time,” Brooks said after the Missouri win. “That’s not a good thing. What really helped me was going home, spending time with my family a little bit, especially with my little brothers. You go home and you see these 17 and 16-year-olds and see how much they look up to you, it really helped me kind of lock back in on what I really needed to do to play well.”

Fans looking for a reason to hope Brooks’ latest standout performance can stick can point to Toppin’s improvements.

There is now a legitimate threat to Brooks’ playing time, and it comes from a player who brings the constant energy and defensive effort that Calipari is demanding of Brooks.

“I’m going to make hustle plays,” Toppin said Tuesday. “I’m going to do whatever I need to do to help this team win. If that’s

not scoring, that’s not a problem because everyone else can score. We can win games without me scoring.”

With Brooks’ shining, Toppin struggled against Missouri, totaling four points and one rebound with two fouls and two turnovers in just 11 minutes.

There is little doubt that Sahvir Wheeler, TyTy Washington, Kellan Grady and Oscar Tshiebwe are going to be on the floor in the most crucial moments for Kentucky. Who occupies the four spot alongside that group seems likely to change from game to game.

So how does Calipari know whether Brooks or Toppin has the hot hand on a given night?

“It’s what energy are they playing with?” Calipari said. “Will they go get rebounds? Will they play physical? I’m not worried about what they do offensively. All ego stuff. If they do the other stuff, guess what? They’ll score the ball.”

Toppin might be the best athlete on Kentucky’s roster, but his offensive skillset is not nearly as refined as Brooks’ game. Toppin is the better defender, but Brooks is the more proven rebounder.

“One of these games both of us are going to play very well at the same time,” Brooks said. “With Jacob, we do everything together. We lift together, we workout together, we’re hanging out a lot. Just the natural competitive fire we have in each other, it pushes us every day. He’s helped me get a lot better, and hopefully I do the same for him.”

Brooks agrees with Calipari’s oft-repeated assessment that his best performances come when he is running the floor and making an effort to grab every rebound.

Of course, that message has not changed over the course of three years in Lexington.

It is also fair to note Brooks has yet to play a normal season of college basketball due to injuries and the pandemic. There is reason to expect further growth in his game.

For that reason, it should come as no surprise that Calipari recently dismissed the suggestion that Brooks might just be an inconsistent player whose performance will vary widely from game to game.

“I don’t think as a coach you ever settle,” Calipari said earlier this season. “Now, there comes a point that, if you want it more for the player than he wants it for himself – and I’m not saying that’s the case with Keion – but that’s when it’s an issue.

“That’s not the case here. This kid is a thoughtful, caring (person). He’s got a great heart. But you’ve got to take what someone else wants. You’ve got to take it. They’re not going to give it to you.”

‘A father figure to a lot of us’: Tubby Smith’s former Kentucky players share memories on eve of his banner ceremony

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Dec. 29

When they unveil a banner for Orlando “Tubby” Smith in the rafters of Rupp Arena on Friday afternoon, as Smith coaches his alma mater, High Point, against the Kentucky program he once led to a national championship, he will become the 45th individual to have a jersey retired and the fourth coach. He’ll join Adolph Rupp, Joe B. Hall and Rick Pitino in that place of honor. He belongs there, among the greats, for winning an SEC regular-season or tournament title — or both — in seven of his 10 years coaching the Wildcats. For averaging 26 wins over a decade, for winning it all in 1998, for being the unanimous national coach of the year in 2003.

But ask one of his former players what made Smith special, memorable, worthy of this moment, and they’ll talk about the time he made them pick up trash in the lodge. The way he admonished them for not appreciating a meal that had been prepared for them. How he always remembered the names of their parents and grandparents and girlfriends.

“It’s amazing what you remember,” says Scott Padgett, who started on Smith’s national title team and won SEC tournament MVP honors the next year. “I can vividly remember him coming into the Wildcat Lodge one time and saying, ‘Get everybody out of their rooms.’ There were trash cans in the corners of the common area, and guys would throw stuff at them; sometimes it went in, and sometimes it didn’t. He walked in and saw a bunch of trash on the floor, and we were in big trouble. We picked that trash up, and we cleaned all the bathrooms right there in front of him. He wanted us to understand: This matters just as much as what we do on the court, because little stuff is big stuff. That was Tubby. You just always knew he was paying attention to the details.”

Wayne Turner, who still owns the school record for steals, ranks fourth in assists, and was the starting point guard for the ‘98 champs, offers up the exact same “favorite” memory of Smith. He cracks up laughing when he learns that Padgett beat him to it.

“You gotta be kidding me,” he says. “But it’s true. We could hear him screaming to get our butts in the hallway. He told us, ‘You live here, you keep it clean.’ He didn’t want us to disrespect our janitors. He didn’t want us to expect others to clean up after us. He wanted us to learn how to be grown men. He was a father figure to a lot of us, and he changed my entire

perspective on life. Honestly, I had never been around a successful Black man before Tubby. It gave me confidence and encouragement that I could also be successful, and he showed me how."

Chuck Hayes, the ultimate small-ball big man, who started 111 games for Smith, won 2005 SEC Defensive Player of the Year and played a dozen years in the NBA before joining the Houston Rockets' front office, still proudly displays a photo of him and Smith on his graduation day at Kentucky. Hayes ranks the influences on his work ethic this way: 1. Mom, 2. Smith. He catches himself imparting Tubby-isms to his son, Dorian, a Class of 2025 recruit. When Dorian was in North Carolina for a basketball camp recently and needed a gym to get a little work in beforehand so that he could put his best foot forward, Hayes called Smith, who pulled a few strings and got a door unlocked.

"I still rely on him, and I'm still grateful for him. I owe him so much," Hayes says. "He's one of the best humans I've ever met. He used to tell me, and now I tell my son: You're not as good as you think, but you're not as bad as you think either. That always pushed me to keep going. When I had bad days, it reminded me it could be worse. When I had great days, it kept me humble and striving to be even better. He just always preached doing things the right way. I remember if we didn't eat the food they provided us, he would take real offense to that. Somebody is here to prepare a meal for you and you barely even touched it? You'd be like, man, why is he tripping? He didn't prepare it. He didn't pay for it. But there was always a bigger purpose with Tubby. He was building men."

Smith might not have recruited at the level of Pitino before him or John Calipari after him, but he did manage a monster haul in 2004. That class featured three McDonald's All-Americans — Randolph Morris, Joe Crawford and Rajon Rondo — plus top-100 prospect Ramel Bradley and prized transfer Patrick Sparks. Bradley, who became an All-SEC guard with more than 1,300 points and 300 assists in his career, remembers that Smith's style was simple, understated, earnest. If that didn't resonate with most elite prospects, it sure stuck with the ones he got.

"Coach Smith traveled to Brooklyn to have dinner with my grandmother and my mother, and they prayed together," Bradley says. "That was a special moment for me, and it's even more special now, because I just lost my grandmother. She thought Coach Smith was a man of great integrity, and that's why I came to Kentucky. He always talked to us about service, about dedicating yourself to what really matters. I've just got so much love, appreciation and

respect for Coach Smith, because the leader that he was made me a better man. It was a huge part of who I am and what I'm doing today. When I think about my career now as an entrepreneur, I think about what he taught me, and I owe it to that man. I'm proud to be one of his players."

Today, Bradley is community director at AppHarvest, a massive indoor farming operation in Eastern Kentucky, promoting agriculture in Appalachia. His life-after-basketball success story is not rare among Smith's former players. That is probably not by accident. Jeff Sheppard, an All-SEC guard and the 1998 Final Four MOP, responds just like everyone The Athletic asked for a favorite memory of Smith: with a story about the kind of man he is.

"The way he lived his life is probably my favorite thing about Coach," Sheppard says. "He was so remarkably consistent. A lot of people will say, 'What was the pregame speech like in San Antonio before the national championship game?' Everyone assumes he had something to fire us up. But he didn't. What he had was a consistency about the preparation. I can remember simple keys on the board like, 'Stay in your defensive stance, meet the ball, block out on free throws.' I'm thinking, 'We're playing for the national championship and those are his keys to the game?' Well, yes, that's how you win championships, by executing the simple fundamentals. I've held onto that for the rest of my life."

Like Hayes, Sheppard now catches himself sharing Smith's wisdom with his son.

"People make life too complicated, make basketball too complicated, make business too complicated, but Coach Smith figured it out: identify simple things that win and stay there," Sheppard says. "That's how we were able to find ourselves down 17 to Duke, down 12 to Stanford, down 10 to Utah in the NCAA Tournament and really not have to change our approach. We just stayed in our role, believed in our coach and our system and each other, and let his leadership guide us. Stick to the plan and stay together is a life lesson my children hear every day."

Smith, now 70, probably doesn't make it up into those rafters on Friday without the Comeback Cats in 1998, but they probably don't make it up onto that ladder to snip a championship net without him. There has always been a bit of an asterisk next to that title in some people's minds, because those were Pitino's players, right? Pitino led Kentucky to the 1996 championship and the 1997 title game, so when he left for the NBA, Smith just had to avoid crashing the Lamborghini he inherited, it seemed. Not exactly. That '96 team was loaded, yes: Ron Mercer and Antoine Walker were top-10 picks; Derek Anderson,

Tony Delk and Walter McCarty were top-20 picks. But all of them were gone by '98. Of Smith's top six players, two were late first-rounders and four were undrafted.

"It's more impressive that Tubby won that title than a lot of people think," Padgett says. "Because we were good players, but we were kind of the leftovers. We weren't a bunch of surefire lottery picks. And I don't think a lot of people take into account just how hard it is to get people to buy into what you do as a coach when they've been so successful doing it somebody else's way. It's a lot easier to come in and get buy-in from players when the previous coach got fired and they were losing. But when you've been to the last two national championship games under the old guy and the new guy comes in and says, 'We're going to do this a little differently,' getting that buy-in was the most impressive thing Tubby did. Because here's the thing: It didn't happen right away. That took time."

Smith knew that, and he got to work on the process immediately. Before Smith's first official team meeting, Turner remembers being at his apartment in Lexington that offseason when his grandmother called. Smith was sitting next to her in his childhood home.

"It was the most amazing thing to me. He went to everybody's house and met their family," Turner says. "He really got to know us first, just personally, before we got into basketball."

The basketball part was a bit bumpy for a while. Kentucky lost three home games during Smith's first season — unthinkable at the time — and there were a couple of real clunkers. Louisville and Florida were both under-.500 teams, but won at Rupp. After Ole Miss handled the Cats in Lexington on Valentine's Day in '98, Smith did something most prideful coaches in his position probably wouldn't have. He did it the last guy's way.

"Coach P was really hard. He was just really, really, really hard. Just demanding, grinding, working us every hour he was allowed," Padgett says. "Tubby had hard practices, but he wasn't in your face. He was a good guy, someone you could talk to. To be honest, we just weren't used to being treated like that. And after we lost to Ole Miss, Tubby just said, 'OK, fine, you guys need to be pushed? Bam, be here at 6 a.m. every day from now on — and we're doing two-a-days the rest of the year.' For a group that was so used to grinding, the more you gave us, the better we were. He figured out that's what we needed, and he pushed that button and that's when we took off. We didn't lose another game."

The night that team won it all against Utah, Sheppard described the '96 cham-

pionship as a relief but the '98 title as "pure joy." One team was star-studded and preordained. The other was a collection of remnants sewn masterfully together to create a beautiful surprise by the end.

"I can tell you the guys from that team are sure glad Tubby is going up in the rafters, because we have never felt like he got enough respect or appreciation for the job he did at Kentucky," Padgett says. "I always likened him to Joe B. Hall, coming in after Rupp with expectations so high that no matter how good you are, it's hard to live up to it. But those guys, Joe B. and Tubby, they won a championship. People just have no idea how hard that is to do."

Smith certainly does. He assembled teams good enough to win championships three years in a row in the early 2000s. The 2003 squad went 32-4 overall, 16-0 in the SEC, finished No. 1 in the AP poll and won 26 consecutive games before falling to a nuclear Dwyane Wade and Marquette in the Elite Eight. SEC Player of the Year Keith Bogans rolled his ankle in the previous round and limped his way through a sub-par performance that day, leading to an all-time what-if.

The 2004 team was the No. 1 overall seed and got upset by UAB in the second round. The next year, Hayes and Kelenna Azubuike returned, Smith's super recruiting class arrived, and Sparks sent an Elite Eight game against Michigan State to overtime with a buzzer-beating 3 that probably should've included a foul call and chance to win it. Another what-if, as the Spartans prevailed in double-OT.

"He could easily have another title," Hayes says. "My last three years at Kentucky were all easily championship-caliber teams. Everything has to go right in the NCAA Tournament, and with one or two breaks, Tubby has at least one more. I've heard people try to criticize and say he should have another one, or that his only championship was with Rick's players, but they're wrong. Rick might've recruited them, but Tubby led them. The fact is, he led a group of men who believed in him, who played hard for him, and they achieved the ultimate goal. He deserves respect, and I'm glad to see him finally getting it. He should've been in the rafters a long time ago."

Smith has led five different programs — Tulsa, Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota and Texas Tech — to the NCAA Tournament, four of them to multiple tournaments, three of them to at least the Sweet 16. With 637 career wins, he's 50th all-time among Division I coaches. That's the kind of stuff that gets a jersey retired. But this is the kind of stuff that makes an army of former players show up to see it:

"I can't really think of Coach ever hav-

ing a bad moment," Hayes says. "You see coaches embarrass themselves all the time, but I'm proud to say that I played for a coach who never did. I'm happy for people to find out that Tubby Smith was my coach."

There are about 25 former players from Smith's early years at Kentucky who stay in touch via text message. Their massive group chat has been pinging lately as guys celebrate their coach and retell old tales.

"Tubby was all about family. He's a big part of that bond that we've kept for all these years, because he made us feel like a big family," Padgett says. "Four or five times a week, one person will tell a story, and it's bang-bang-bang, 'Yeah, and remember this?' Which reminds me: You know another thing I remember about Tubby? He had this great laugh. The kind of laugh that would make everyone else laugh. So we always tried to make him laugh, just to hear it."

They don't put stuff like that on your banner, but Smith wouldn't have one without it.

'We care for them.' Calipari, Beshear hand out shoes to tornado victims

By Jeremy Chisenhall | Lexington Herald-Leader | Dec. 19

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear and University of Kentucky basketball coach John Calipari on Sunday handed out shoes to Kentucky residents displaced by tornadoes last weekend.

Calipari said in a tweet that 5,000 pairs of shoes were available on site at Pennyriple and Lake Barkley state parks, with another 5,000 shoes on the way. The shoes were donated by Samaritan's Feet, a company which provides shoes to those in need, according to Beshear's office. Some of the Kentucky residents who have been displaced are staying at the state parks.

"The damage in the area is obvious and devastating, but buildings can be rebuilt," Calipari said in a tweet. "Our focus right now is on the people in that area and the enormous toll this has taken on them. How can we lift spirits and let people know we care for them and are there for them?"

Calipari called Samaritan's Feet CEO Manny Ohonme after hearing from Beshear that shoes were needed, according to Beshear's office. Ohonme "turned this around in 48 hours," Calipari said.

Calipari, Beshear and Ohonme were joined Sunday by Lt. Gov. Jacqueline Coleman, UK athletics director Mitch Barnhart, and former men's basketball players Darius Miller and Jack Givens.

"So many people are stepping up in big ways to support our families in Western

Kentucky," Coleman said in a statement. "We Kentuckians have grit, but we have compassion in equal measure, and we truly are showing up for each other right now."

"I want to thank all the volunteers, everyone who has donated to our Team Western Kentucky Tornado Relief Fund, and this morning, I especially want to thank Coach Cal and Samaritan's Feet. Today, Manny, you too are a Kentuckian."

Beshear said Saturday that 944 people were being housed by the state after their homes were affected by the tornadoes. The devastation from the tornadoes had led to more than 10,000 insurance claims being filed, according to Beshear's office.

"We are all neighbors in Kentucky," Beshear said in a statement Sunday. "We love one another and we look out for one another. And my commitment to the folks of Western Kentucky is, we won't be here just this week or this month, but we will be here every single day for however long it takes to rebuild every building and every life, to get everyone as close as we can to where they need to be."

As Kentucky state parks house tornado victims, the state has said the parks need volunteers from Christmas Day through the following week.

Those who can help should contact Andy Kasitz, assistant director of resort parks for Kentucky State Parks, at 502-418-3581 or by email at andy.kasitz@ky.gov, according to Beshear's office. Volunteers need to make their own arrangements for housing because all available accommodations at the parks are needed for those displaced and for first responders.

Nearly all seven state parks were at capacity as of Friday, according to Beshear's office. Park accommodations will be available for four weeks minimum, according to Beshear. The park accommodations were initially only available for two weeks.

Sahvir Wheeler proves he's right where he needs to be in leading Kentucky past North Carolina

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Dec. 19

LAS VEGAS — Sahvir Wheeler must've read the tweets. John Calipari must not have. As Kentucky prepared to board the team bus at T-Mobile Arena on Saturday night after the Wildcats were done demolishing North Carolina 98-69, Calipari shook his head demonstratively at the question: *Had you given any thought to a growing consensus that someone other than Wheeler needs to play point guard?* It was so silly, he must have thought. Calipari jabbed the asker with an elbow. Nope. Uh-uh. No way. Not for a second. Are you out of your mind?

OK, well, then what had Calipari

thought about, in terms of which buttons to push to optimize his offense, after watching Notre Dame beat Kentucky last weekend by deciding Wheeler “can’t shoot” and sagging so far off him that the whole operation clogged like a truck-stop toilet?

“How do I help him?” Calipari said. “And then, how I help him is: If they play him the way Notre Dame did, what do we do? I grabbed him and said, ‘You have to have been played this way before — tell me what you did.’ So we got together and worked on it. Look, I’ve got to figure stuff out. I don’t blame kids, and that’s why. This is on me.”

The plan, at least for this one, after the Cats found out Friday that they’d be playing the Tar Heels instead of Ohio State — thanks to COVID-19 issues with the Buckeyes and UNC’s scheduled CBS Sports Classic opponent, UCLA — was to exploit an obvious weakness. Hubert Davis’ team apparently can’t keep anybody in front and has very little in the way of rim protection. Tennessee had soundly beaten the Heels with a barrage of layups and dunks. The Vols scored 44 points that way.

And though it’s essentially true that Wheeler cannot shoot from the outside, the 5-foot-9 junior is one of the fastest guards in college basketball. He’s also an above-average finisher for someone his size.

“Me and my dad watched that Tennessee game this morning,” Wheeler said. “‘Let’s see how they were able to get into the paint.’ We dissected that.” And? “Challenging the bigs’ foot speed. There’s not many people that can match my foot speed, so once I got downhill with good screens set by our bigs, I was able to make plays.”

Lots and lots and lots of plays. Wheeler delivered his finest performance of the season: 26 points on 12-of-15 shooting, eight assists, four steals and just two turnovers. That after missing all five of the jump shots Notre Dame dared him to take and dishing just two assists against the Irish. For the first time in 10 games at Kentucky, Wheeler did not attempt a 3-point shot. He did not settle. He attacked the entire game. Eleven of his shots were at the rim.

“The lane opened up like the Red Sea,” he said.

In 32 minutes, Wheeler raised his season field goal percentage from 40.7 to 46.5.

“The biggest thing I did prior to the game,” Calipari said, “individually and then in front of the team, was (saying): ‘Sahvir, lead us. It’s not based on how you’re playing. Sahvir, lead us. If you’re playing great, lead us and get everybody involved.

If you’re not making shots or you’re a little confused, lead us. Lead.’ That’s what he did today.”

Kentucky, which has driven its fans crazy in recent years with an archaic obsession with long 2-point shots, took a positively modern approach Saturday. Especially in the second half, when 25 of its 36 shots were layups, dunks or 3-pointers. The Cats led by 18 in the first half and 35 in the second half and won by 29, the second-largest margin in 42 all-time meetings between the blue blood programs. It was UNC’s worst loss since 2012.

It seems nuts now to think there was an outcry — from fans and, ahem, certain sportswriters who shall remain nameless — to put the ball in someone other than Wheeler’s hands. TyTy Washington Jr. is a much better shooter and all-around scorer, but Saturday was another reminder that UK’s five-star freshman guard lacks the requisite aggressiveness Wheeler has in spades.

“We did not have an answer for Wheeler,” Davis said. “He was faster than any one of our players, and he was able to get anywhere he wanted to. We knew that he’s a dynamic guard that can get into the middle and that can make plays. He’s terrific at distributing the basketball. He’s terrific at penetrating. And plain and simple, period, the end, he was better than any one of our guards.”

Thanks to Wheeler, Kentucky maintained a double-digit lead for the final 33 minutes Saturday, even when star Oscar Tshiebwe played just seven first-half minutes because of foul trouble. Tshiebwe, of course, still finished with 16 points and 12 rebounds. But the guards won that game. Wheeler’s probing left Kellan Grady open for more shots with room and rhythm than he’s seen all season. Grady made them count and looked for the first time like the same guy who scored 2,000 points at Davidson. He had 18 and 6 against UNC and sank five of his seven 3-point tries.

If not exactly innovative, Calipari’s approach was effective. The team worked all week on some of his old-school dribble-drive concepts.

“When you go to the dribble drive, you’re opening up the court, and that’s what happened,” he said. Of the team’s offensive struggles before Saturday: “Whose fault is that? It’s my fault. I’m still figuring this team out.” And at least this much could be considered comforting for fans who fear an outdated approach will cost Kentucky come March: “If you’re not getting to 75 or 80 (points), you’re not going to go on a run at the end of the year,” Calipari said. “You’re just not.”

It remains to be seen if the Cats (8-2) can keep scoring like this with a point

guard who isn’t an outside shooting threat, but it’s clear they’re prepared to live or die with Wheeler as their guy. Whatever clamor there has been for anyone else to lead Kentucky, he says he hasn’t heard it. Or he’s good at ignoring it.

“None of that was on my mind,” Wheeler said. “I’m a confident kid, and I play for the big lights. This is why I came here: to play against the best, to be challenged every day.”

Thing is, these Cats had not yet beaten a high-major opponent. They’d opened the season with a loss to Duke in New York, beat seven straight cupcakes at home, then lost their first road game in South Bend. North Carolina might not be good, turns out, but to pummel a name-brand opponent on a national stage was certainly good for optics and morale.

With COVID-19 wreaking havoc again on college basketball, wiping out games and pausing teams left and right over the past week, Wheeler offered a sobering thought Saturday.

“I know some of us were like, ‘Man, this could be our last game for a while, so just go out there and give it your all,’” he said. “‘Play your hardest.’”

And the Cats responded by playing so much harder than the Tar Heels that Davis said he was “shocked” by the disparity in effort. He said he thanked Calipari for the beating when they shook hands. Because no player or coach with any pride could walk away from such an embarrassment without understanding the urgent need to change. Kentucky discovered something similar in its previous loss. The conclusion: It’s not who plays that needs to change, but how.

“We need days like today every single time,” Tshiebwe said. “If we come out like this every single night, every single day, it’s going to be so tough for the people we’re going to go against. They’re going to have a nightmare playing against us.”

Kentucky’s Oscar Tshiebwe will not be boxed out: ‘If I quit now, I’m quitting on my family’

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Dec. 17

Watch Oscar Tshiebwe play basketball for five minutes, really any five minutes, selected at random, and one thing becomes abundantly clear: He wants more. More rebounds, as he keeps hoarding them at a historic rate, but they’re merely a means to an end. Watch him hunt those rebounds, ripping them from opponents and teammates alike, bounding over taller players, sometimes two or three at a time, inhaling them as if they’re the very oxygen that sustains him, and it’s unmistakable. He wants more out of a life that hasn’t always been

fair. More for himself, more for his mother, more for his siblings, all of them left with so much less when his father died suddenly nine years ago.

"I play for my family," he says. "Every single game, every single practice, every single moment."

Tshiebwe returned to the Democratic Republic of the Congo this summer for the first time since he left to chase a crazy basketball dream in the United States six years ago. He found his mother, Kaya, sharing a tiny home with some of his siblings and their children. There were 10 people crammed into a space maybe twice the size of his Kentucky dorm room. With no space for a 6-foot-9, 255-pound basketball player to sleep, he stayed at a hotel during the visit.

"When I saw how my mom was living, it broke my heart so bad," Tshiebwe says. "It really hurt me. I said, 'This is not fair.' I came back here and said, 'I promise I'm going to work.' And now I work for my family. When I feel like I'm about to quit, I say, 'This is the moment. If I quit now, I'm quitting on my family. If I quit now, they're going to stay in that same situation. But if I keep working, I'm going to change their situation.' This is why I cannot let anyone dominate me. This is why I gotta be the one who dominates."

Mike Krzyzewski once famously asked if he was a machine. Not a machine, a then-16-year-old Tshiebwe replied, I'm Oscar. Through his first nine games at Kentucky, though, cyborg suspicions have been renewed. Tshiebwe is averaging 16.3 points, 14.4 rebounds, 1.9 blocks and 1.4 steals for the Wildcats. He leads the nation in total rebounds, offensive rebounds and Player Efficiency Rating. Since 2009-10, the highest single-season rebound percentage by any Division I player was 27.8; Tshiebwe's so far this season is 28.8. The highest PER in that span was Zion Williamson's 40.8; Tshiebwe's is 41.1.

How's he doing this? The same way he's done so many other previously unimaginable things, like giving up soccer for basketball at 14 and arriving in America a year later speaking almost no English, spending his first year of high school on junior varsity ... and then blossoming into a five-star recruit and All-Big 12 selection as a freshman at West Virginia.

Talk to Tshiebwe for five minutes and two more things jump out: He can't stop smiling, and he sounds an awful lot like a preacher. Neither of those things is by accident. His father, Mbuyi, was a Pentecostal preacher who led a large, popular congregation in the Congo, which Oscar believes led to some jealousy in the community and ultimately his death (by poisoning, Oscar says) in 2012. Hours before his father

passed, before he was even feeling ill, Oscar says Mbuyi must've had a sixth sense and sat him down for a conversation that has guided his life ever since.

"You're the only one of my children who listens to me. You're the only one who can take care of this family," Tshiebwe says his father, a mountain of a man himself, told him. "He said, 'Take care of them, Oscar. Promise me.' And then he was just gone. I went to play soccer with my friends, and people came running to tell me he was gone. 'Your father has died!' I didn't even cry at first, because I did not believe it. You cannot just die like that. That's not fair. I was just with him. No, he's going to wake up. But he was gone, and I got mad at God."

How, then, did he get here? To the place where Tshiebwe is hosting Bible studies on Kentucky's campus? Furthermore, how on earth is he smiling after all that? Because the wisdom of his father, who still visits in dreams, often to warn against the pitfalls of partying too hard, is forever echoing in his mind.

"One thing my daddy always said is you gotta enjoy your hard times, because the struggle teaches you," Tshiebwe says.

After he opened the season with consecutive 20-rebound games, Tshiebwe said other Kentucky players began to wonder if a few of those boards came from above. They marvel at how, for all the ones that he snatches violently from someone else, a handful of rebounds every game just seem to find him. Like some kind of divine, unseen hand is guiding the ball right into his mitts.

"Everybody came into the locker room one night and said, 'We might as well start doing what Oscar is doing. Maybe we should meditate and pray,'" Tshiebwe says, laughing. Teammates Bryce Hopkins and Sahvir Wheeler have since attended a Bible study.

There was no peace for Tshiebwe at West Virginia. He played well enough, averaging 11.2 points and 9.3 rebounds as a freshman. He was doing fine through 10 games as a sophomore, too, even as his numbers dipped to 8.5 and 7.8 while surrendering minutes to frontcourt co-star Derek Culver. But from Day 1, Tshiebwe says, he was miserable in Morgantown. He has said many times that Kentucky was his dream school all along and he can't — or won't — explain with any specificity why he signed with WVU instead. His first meal in the U.S. was at Kentucky Fried Chicken, and he loved it. At his first high school in Virginia, when other kids talked about college basketball, it was always Kentucky.

"So I wanted to know, what is Kentucky?" Tshiebwe says. He quickly learned the Wildcats have sent a parade of big

men to the NBA. "And I fell in love with Kentucky. I said, I want to go there. Nobody believed me. My coaches said, 'You're on JV. You think you can go to Kentucky?' I couldn't even speak English. My teammates said, you're never even going to make it to college, so don't even think about Kentucky. But I don't care what people say. If you say a good thing, I'll take it and be motivated. If you say a negative thing, I'll just leave it behind and take what God is saying. He says nothing is impossible, so I did not stop right there. I worked harder."

By the time he was a high school senior, having transferred to Kennedy Catholic in Pittsburgh for his final two years to refine both his English and his basketball skills, Tshiebwe was a top-25 recruit with offers from just about every major college program in the country. Including Kentucky. His dream came true. Only, it didn't. Not right away.

"My daddy used to tell me, 'There are people who come into your life with expiration dates.' There are certain times when you're about to level up, and those people cannot come with you," Tshiebwe says, attempting yet again to explain why he initially picked West Virginia. "I wanted to take everybody with me. I wanted to listen to everybody. I did not want to break anybody's heart. I wanted to make everybody happy. But that was breaking my heart. I ended up choosing a place I did not want to go because I didn't want to break anybody's heart. This process taught me a lot of things. You gotta have a little circle. When your circle is too big, that's when you bring a lot of problems to yourself. Destruction."

Tom Droney, a three-year starter at Davidson at the beginning of the 2010s, is still in Tshiebwe's tightened circle. Droney coached his Adidas grassroots team and was an assistant at Kennedy Catholic for Tshiebwe's two seasons there. When younger brother Debaba joined him in the U.S., Oscar became his legal guardian and recently sent Debaba to live with Droney. When Tshiebwe decided to get a new cell phone number last month, Droney was on the short list of people who can still reach him.

"Oscar is about to be 22 now, and the biggest thing he's learned is he can't make big life decisions based on what other people want," Droney says. "He's been betrayed, he's learned who he can trust, been on both sides of the coin. He understands now that there are people who want what's best for him and certain people who just want something out of him. But he's a man now and realizes he can make these decisions on his own, and he needs to."

Tshiebwe wanted to leave after his

freshman season at West Virginia but says he was persuaded — again, how and by whom remains an unclarified detail — to stick it out. He let himself get out of shape heading into his sophomore season, and by Christmas was losing both playing time and hope. He says he cried “every day” wishing he was at Kentucky. He watched the Wildcats struggle last season, in part because they had no post presence. With every loss his dream school suffered, Tshiebwe was sick at the thought: I am exactly what they needed.

He prayed about what to do. He confided in his mother. She advised, if it hurts this much to stay, go. Right now. So he woke up one morning in January, packed his bags and left.

“When there’s something in your heart that you’re holding and you can’t let it go,” Tshiebwe says, “I did not want to put that (West Virginia) jersey on. God heard my cry for help and he said, get your stuff. It was a tough decision to leave. People say, ‘You’re ruining your life.’ People say, ‘If you make that decision, you’re done.’ Coach (Bob Huggins) told me he was going to ruin my life if I did that. He was going to say all these different things to NBA GMs so nobody would ever want me. He said a lot of negative things about me to Coach (John) Calipari. He said I got caught smoking weed. He said I got caught with a lot of different women. Crazy stuff I didn’t know about. I told Coach Calipari, ‘If you believe those things, that means I cannot be at Kentucky. But you know me, you recruited me since high school, and I’ve been a faithful kid. I respect every human being.’”

Huggins vehemently denies threatening Tshiebwe with a smear campaign.

“That’s absolutely not the truth,” he says, claiming he has not spoken to Tshiebwe since he played his final game for West Virginia. “Some people came and got him and took him to Lexington, and to this day I don’t know who they are. I don’t really care who they are. But I never said any of that to Oscar. I’d never say anything even remotely like that. The kid’s having a great year. Obviously, he and Cal are hitting it off. It’s all good. So I don’t know why Oscar would ever bring up something that didn’t happen. Because the truth of the matter is there’s a whole lot of people who could get drug through the mud. He got what he wanted. I never tried to stop him. I never called him and said, ‘Hey, man, you’re making a mistake.’ None of that. Absolutely none of that. I did not speak to the kid. I can take a lie detector.”

What is not in dispute, however, is that Huggins took a public swipe at Tshiebwe early this season after a disappointing performance by his Mountaineers. Toward the end of a good-old-days rant about how he

grew up in an era where you earned everything you got, Huggins said he wasn’t going to budge on that principle in his program. And if his players don’t like it, “go ahead and transfer.” But he didn’t stop there.

“We lost an alleged McDonald’s All-American,” Huggins said, “because he didn’t like the fact that we were making him do things that were hard.”

It was plainly a swipe at Tshiebwe. And why do that?

“Um,” Huggins says now, “after a loss, frustrated probably. But I didn’t mean it personally.”

Calipari and Huggins are longtime friends. They spoke after Tshiebwe’s transfer “briefly one day,” Huggins says. The conversation went “fine.” Calipari was asked last month about the public dig at his star and said he and Huggins are still friends.

“But it’s hard to say he doesn’t work hard,” Calipari says. He cites Tshiebwe’s rebounding stats before grinning and whispering: “He works hard.”

“He works his ass off every day,” teammate Keion Brooks says. “You couldn’t ask for somebody better on your team. Oscar is an incredible human being. So full of life, happy, positive, and it’s infectious to the whole program. I’ve never seen Oscar not smiling. He’s just a wonder to be around. Kind of makes me reevaluate myself at times.”

That doesn’t sound like someone who is allergic to a challenge. Tshiebwe speaks six languages now, but he could barely communicate when he arrived in the U.S. His first year in high school, he says he was tested in English with no assistance, which was every bit as nightmarish as it sounds. He learned to memorize keywords by sight on the study guide during cram sessions.

“I didn’t understand what I was looking at,” he says. “Just, if I see this word tomorrow, this is the answer. And I passed. I never failed a class.”

Tshiebwe practiced with last year’s team for the second semester but could not play, because the free transfer rule had not yet passed. He got in the best shape of his career by the time this season started. He made his Kentucky debut, of all places and opponents, at Madison Square Garden against Duke. He grabbed 20 rebounds in front of the Hall of Fame coach who’d wondered where he was hiding his gears all those years ago. He posted at least 10 rebounds in his first eight games for the Wildcats — and now he’s become an offensive force, scoring 20-plus in three consecutive games.

“It was a total 180” once he left West Virginia, Droney says. “I can tell when he says he’s good but he’s not really, and it’s completely authentic now. That smile is

real. He’s really, truly happy.”

Tshiebwe has become not only the team’s best player but also its biggest, most beloved personality. That sparkling smile and his quirky one-liners, his over-the-top affection for wearing a Kentucky jersey and his relentless style on the court have made him as popular with fans as any player since Willie Cauley-Stein and Karl-Anthony Towns in 2015.

“When you get to the place you always wanted to be, you’re not worried about anything,” Tshiebwe says. “I wanted to be coached by Coach Calipari and now I’m in his hands. He’s taking care of me. I’m not listening to anybody else anymore. Nobody else can tell me how to play the game, because I’m in great hands.”

That’s not to say he doesn’t still want more. It’s evident by how he plays he wants to be a pro. Coming to Kentucky was always a means to an end, just like rebounding as if his life depends on it. Because it kind of does. And that’s the one unfortunate detail in an otherwise happy ending. He’s not a sure-fire NBA player and, for now, he can’t even really cash in on the new name, image and likeness era in college athletics.

There is no doubt he’d be cleaning up — and sending big checks home to the Congo — if he was allowed to sign endorsement deals. Teammate TyTy Washington is well into six-figure earnings. Tshiebwe would be an even bigger NIL star, but he’s here on an F1 student visa, which prohibits him from having an off-campus job. To this point, Tshiebwe has only been allowed to record video messages for \$50 (individuals) and \$150 (businesses) apiece on Cameo. It’s a pittance compared to what the market suggests he’s worth.

But immigration lawyer Paul Saluja is working to solve this problem for Tshiebwe.

“The question becomes: Is name, image and likeness actually working? Or is it just a royalty based on your personal brand,” Saluja says. “The other factor is when there’s an economic need or hardship, you can ask for a waiver. We’re in the process of seeking permission for him to go ahead and be permitted to work off campus. We believe Oscar is going to have an NBA career and transition out of a student visa into another visa, and we want to make sure that he does nothing that jeopardizes his ability to remain in the United States. So out of an abundance of caution, we are seeking permission.”

Saluja believes Tshiebwe has an obvious hardship and will eventually be granted the waiver, but that might not happen for several more weeks. In the meantime, of course Tshiebwe wants more, but if you’ve spent five minutes watching him, listening

to him or reading about him at this point, you already know how he's handling the wait.

"I'm not even frustrated," he says. "I'm happy, because if I can't do that, it means God has a different plan. My family has believed in that for years. I say, 'God, you know how my family is living and you know how bad we need help. I trust you.' And when it's time to make money, I will make money."

Yes, Tshiebwe wants more and is willing to wait.

UK Athletics raises more than \$3 million to support Western Kentucky tornado relief

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal
Dec. 14

The UK athletic department's telethon to support Western Kentucky tornado relief efforts had raised \$3,031,241 by the end of the event Tuesday.

"On an incredible night, the Big Blue Nation and all of Kentucky continue to show the special bond that exists throughout the people of the Commonwealth," UK athletic director Mitch Barnhart said. "As relief organizations and volunteers continue to help rebuild the lives of so many, we are thankful to all who contributed to the telethon, the volunteers who made it happen, the American Red Cross, WLEX and JMI Sports. When you raise more than \$3 million in four hours through the hearts of wonderful people who care so deeply about those who are hurting, it's really special."

"We will continue to find ways to help rebuild, restore, heal and return stronger than before. Our hearts extend this hope and promise to the people of Western Kentucky."

Proceeds will go to the American Red Cross. UK basketball coach John Calipari led the effort with UK donors Joe and Kelly Craft to solicit matching donations for money raised during the telethon.

During the four-hour telethon, UK coaches and athletes answered phones soliciting donations. Through Dec. 19, Fans can still donate the the fund online (redcross.org/donate/cm/wlectv-pub.html/) or by mailing a check to American Red Cross, Attn: Kentucky Tornadoes, 1450 Newtown Pike, Lexington, KY 40511.

Former UK basketball stars John Wall, Eric Bledsoe, Enes Kanter, Julius Randle, Willie Cauley-Stein, Karl-Anthony Towns, Devin Booker, Jamal Murray, Bam Adebayo, Malik Monk, Tyrese Maxey and DeMarcus Cousins were among those who donated.

Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz, whose team will face Kentucky in the Jan. 1 Citrus Bowl, and Ohio State basketball coach

Chris Holtmann, whose team will face UK in the CBS Sports Classic in Las Vegas on Saturday, both tweeted messages urging their fans to support the fundraising efforts.

TyTy Washington comfortable in his role as the quiet star

By Zack Geoghegan | Kentucky Sports Radio | Dec. 9

TyTy Washington came to Kentucky with expectations of shouldering an almost overbearing amount of hype. The 6-foot-3 point guard was a late addition to John Calipari's 2021 recruiting class, but easily the most important. Eight games into the 2021-22 season, Washington hasn't shown immediate star power comparable to the likes of former Wildcat guards John Wall or Tyrese Maxey.

But considering the deep roster makeup of this year's Kentucky squad, that's not the role Washington is being asked to fill. Instead, he's one of two lead ball handlers, playing alongside a veteran point guard with over 60 games of college experience under his belt in Sahvir Wheeler. Oscar Tshiebwe is UK's clear superstar right now, too, averaging 15/15 on the young season.

Washington is a near-perfect mold for what Calipari is looking for in a point guard; he's also the first during Cal's Kentucky tenure allowed to take a step back. However, Washington isn't taking a step back at all. He's just not over-exerting himself.

In a 76-64 win over Southern University on Tuesday night, Washington was excellent once again, finishing with 14 points (5-10 shooting), three rebounds, five assists, and one steal in 26 minutes of action.

Only Wheeler has played more minutes than Washington this season. Washington's 99 shot attempts this season (of which he's made 47.5 percent) are the most on the team by 18. Only Kentucky's two bigs, Tshiebwe and Daimion Collins, shoot a higher overall percentage than him. Tshiebwe is the only Wildcat averaging more rebounds per game than Washington, as well.

Washington's numbers on the season have quietly been wildly impressive. The freshman is averaging 14.8 points (second-most on the team) on a shooting split of 47.5/39.3/81.3 that has NBA executives drooling. He doesn't turn the ball over at a fat rate despite high usage. He rarely commits fouls and has an instinct for involving his teammates.

But when you watch Kentucky play, you wouldn't know he was putting up these types of stats. Outside of the season-opener against Duke, where Washington was rushing himself and forcing plays, he can feel invisible on the court. That's not a bad

thing, though. If anything, it's a testament to his attitude and maturity.

He hears the noise from the outside, where fans and media members (KSR included) suggest he could be the bonafide star Kentucky needs to morph into a Final Four-caliber team. But Washington doesn't feed into it, even if he might believe it too. He's too humble to do so.

"Yeah, I hear it but I really don't focus on it," Washington said after Tuesday's win over Southern. "I don't listen to the outside noise like that. My family, they do a really good of telling me like 'you're not the best player on the team, do your role, be a star in your role' and that's the same thing the coaches are telling me too. I got the coaches telling me that and my parents telling me that."

"My parents and my family, they know it's all about winning at the end of the day. Winning takes care of everything and that's the standard that's held here. Kentucky is known for winning. So every game it's just bring what I bring to the table and hopefully that turns out to be able to get us the win."

Kentucky is 7-1 on the season, with Washington making significant contributions in every victory. As each game goes by, he continues to look more and more like the star point guard UK lacked last season; doing so with impressive efficiency. Washington's style of play isn't meant to be flashy anyways. He's just incredible sound at nearly every aspect of the game.

That level of poise and control for an 18-year old doesn't come around very often. It's a product of the people around him that helped raise him. Washington has never been a "me me me" player, it's always about "win win win".

"It's just the way I play," Washington added. "At the end of the day, I feel like the way I play is just—whenever somebody asks how do I describe my game the first thing I always say is winning. Because that's my ultimate goal is to win, so I don't care what I have to do win. I know with the team we got, I don't have to go out there and try to score 30 points every single night."

Even in this "reserved" role, Washington is rising up NBA Draft boards. He's easily Kentucky's top professional prospect right now without playing anywhere close to his potential. Eventually, his aggression will catch up with his confidence and willingness to win. Once that happens, the sky will be the limit.

Woods, Calipari offer emotional takes on impact of Underground Railroad museum

By Darrell Bird | The Cats Pause | Dec. 8

John Calipari is white. Sean Woods is

black. Together, they helped show society the best way forward.

On Tuesday night, Calipari's Kentucky basketball team defeated Woods' Southern team 76-64. But the game was an afterthought – a formality if truth be told – to the conclusion of a weeklong event UK billed as the "Unity Series."

The first year in a five-year commitment by Calipari to play a team from the SWAC, which is made up of historically black colleges and universities, the event features educational and networking opportunities. The first stop was the National Underground Railroad Freedom Museum in Cincinnati where both teams gathered on Sunday.

"Going to the Underground Railroad museum was very educational and very eye-opening," said Woods, who played at Kentucky as a member of "The Unforgettables" in 1992.

"When we all grew up when you mentioned the Underground Railroad, you mentioned Harriet Tubman," Woods said. "But Harriet Tubman was just a little piece in the movement. To learn exactly what went down and the people who were involved was very eye-opening.

"It wasn't about Harriet Tubman and black people trying to help black people get to freedom. It was white folks helping black folks get to freedom," Woods said. "Whenever both races get together, great things happen. That taught me and my players. Whenever you separate people and try to downgrade people, nothing good ever happens. But when you come together and stick together, great things happen."

We see that truth on display every day in athletics, regardless of the sport, regardless of the level of play.

"Because you have no choice," Woods said. "You can't run from it in athletics. You can't go back to your community because you have to face whoever is different from you every single day. So you lose yourself. You forget who you are."

Moreover, a striking reality soon hits home for players, regardless of race.

"In order for you to be successful, you have to help them to be successful," Woods said. "If you don't help them be successful, there is no way you can."

That truth was never more tested than with Woods' own 1992 Kentucky team. The roster mix ranged from black kids from New York to Chicago to rural Mississippi, an Hispanic player from Miami and five white kids from rural Kentucky.

"I'm from Gary, Indiana," Woods said. "Richie Farmer is from Clay County. Jonathan Davis is from Florida, John Pelphrey is from Paintsville. But we came together and if we didn't come together there is no

way we could have had the success that we had.

"It wasn't just Rick Pitino," Woods said. "It was everybody buying in and helping each other. That's what this world needs to continue to get better at."

It's a lesson fighting to be heard 30 years later as evidenced by the impact of the Underground Railroad Museum on the players, young people who are bombarded today by information often twisted by personal politics.

"From the stuff I learned in school and the stuff I learned there, nothing went hand in hand at all," Kentucky freshman TyTy Washington said. "Learning about my culture is always a big plus. But the school system is not telling you everything that really went on. We went there and they didn't really talk about Harriet Tubman at all. They were talking about people I had never heard of. Me and my teammates took our time and were really interested in learning."

"The museum was a very touching event," Southern's Jayden Saddler said. "We realized a lot of history that we didn't learn in school. Like coach said, it wasn't just black folks helping black folks, it was a lot of white folks helping black folks. It was a lot of touching moments and it was just a great experience."

One sobering reality struck home with Washington.

"Those people had to walk 30 to 40 days to get to their destination" Washington said. "I don't know of one single soul that would walk 30 to 40 days to get where they had to go."

Coach John Calipari, a 62-year-old white male, found himself conflicted.

"I was really uncomfortable," the coach confessed. "It makes you think. How would you be in the mid-1800s if you lived in the South? Would I have the same heart, would I be the same person? Just made me uncomfortable."

Not to worry. Woods has zero doubt about Calipari.

"I'm not tooting Cal's horn but Cal is one of the best at doing what he is supposed to do," Woods said. "I told my guys that he's getting these guys to the NBA within six months and in 24 months they are going to be millionaires, but he knows how to humble them. How many coaches in America makes a kid who thinks he's going to be a millionaire in six months wash the feet of a homeless person? Who thinks of this? He's got it."

The Unity Series, which brought together not only the basketball players, but students from both schools, included a Name, Image and Likeness educational component. Two students – Erica Gabriel, a doctoral candidate in UK's School of

Music, and Deterrius Johnson of Southern University's Music Program – performed the National Anthem before the game. And 150 tickets to the game were provided to three Lexington elementary schools identified by UK's Diversity Advocacy Committee.

All of that is on top of the McClendon Leadership Initiative that Calipari willed into existence last spring. The program, which involves 35 coaches, strives to provide minorities a jump-start to their careers through practical experiences and networking opportunities.

"I tell you what, these last few days have been awesome in leading up to this basketball game," Woods said. "I tell my guys all the time, it's bigger than basketball. The way this world is right now, we need all to find a way to help one another. I think that's what this whole deal was all about. I'm just so thankful that Cal gave me the call first to do this because it was totally awesome."

How TyTy Washington followed in the footsteps of Devin Booker, Tyler Herro in Kentucky win

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal
Nov. 17

Oscar Tshiebwe insists he was joking, but for freshman guard TyTy Washington the playful jab might have struck a little too close to home.

"I was joking around with him one day in the locker room, 'I've been praying to God so my teammates miss shots so I can grab some rebounds today,'" Tshiebwe said with a smile after Kentucky's 80-55 win over Mount Saint Mary's.

Tshiebwe's joke centered around his ferocious rebounding ability that saw him average 20 total rebounds and 11 offensive rebounds per game in Kentucky's first two games, but he and Washington both knew several of those offensive rebounds had come on missed shots by the Wildcats' most-hyped freshman.

In his collegiate debut against Duke in Madison Square Garden, Washington hit just 3 of 14 shots and missed both his 3-point attempts. In the home opener against Robert Morris, Washington hit his first four shots in the game but made just 1 of his last six. He did not score in the second half and missed his only 3-point attempt.

Against Mount Saint Mary's, Washington began to show off the scoring ability that was evident in his stellar exhibition performances and breakout senior season at Compass Prep in Arizona. He finished the win with 16 points on 7-of-12 shooting and made 2 of 3 3-point attempts.

"It felt really good," Washington said. "It felt like I wasted all my bullets in the

exhibition games. ... Like Cal says ... you can't miss them all. You don't have to make them all, but you just can't miss them all. Today, I didn't miss them all."

While a few of Calipari's highly touted Kentucky guards have started their college careers with immediate success, early struggles have been far more common.

Brandon Knight was 3 for 24 from 3-point range in three Maui Invitational games in November 2010. James Young converted just 7 of 28 (25 percent) 3-point attempts in his first four games. That same season, Aaron Harrison missed 11 of his first 13 3-point attempts across three games.

Jamal Murray missed 9 of 10 3-point shots in his second game. Malik Monk was 3 for 12 from 3-point range in his first two games. Kevin Knox shot 6 for 23 (26 percent) from the field and 2 for 8 (25 percent) from 3-point range in his first two games.

Even Devin Booker, the eventual NBA superstar, missed all six of his shots in his UK debut and made just 1 of his first 11 3-point attempts across three games. Tyler Herro made 4 of 17 shots and 1 of 8 3s in his first two games. He missed all six of his shots in game No. 2.

Washington, Kentucky's highest-ranked class of 2021 recruit and highest-rated 2022 NBA draft prospect, deserved mention with most of those players when he signed with Kentucky. He quickly backed up that hype by scoring at least 15 points in each of the two preseason exhibitions, hitting all six of his 3-point attempts across the two warm-up games.

But against Duke, he looked like a player trying to force things and make a statement in his first glimpse at the national spotlight.

"The first game was the first game," junior forward Keion Brooks said. "Granted, it was against a really good team in Madison Square Garden, but we've got 30 more games to play. That one game doesn't define him and who he is. He's a great player. He always let the game come to him and he makes the right plays. I just told him to continue doing that and he'll be fine."

Washington took confidence in the fact that while he may have forced a few shots against the Blue Devils, many of the shots he missed in the first two games were open looks at the kind of shots he generally searches for in the offense. Playing alongside junior point guard Sahvir Wheeler, who has served as the Wildcats' primary initiator while averaging 10 assists per game, was also an adjustment for a player used to playing with the ball in his hands.

But Kentucky's offense still works best when Washington has the ball as often as possible. Both he and Wheeler can bring

the ball up the court, and Calipari had to remind Washington before the Duke game to be more assertive in searching for his own shot.

"He learned a little bit about the physicality of the game," UK associate to the head coach Bruiser Flint said after that game. "He was the main focus for (Duke), you could tell. He's got to understand that's how people are going to play him all year. He's a freshman. You have to learn that sometimes."

While Washington's shot began to fall more consistently against Mount Saint Mary's he was far from perfect.

Calipari took issue with his four turnovers, noting a couple came in situations where Washington had been instructed to push the pace down the court but then reset to start the half-court offense if a shot was not immediately available. Another came on an attempted lob pass to freshman forward Daimion Collins that Calipari said was not thrown high enough.

"He's getting better," Calipari said. "He'll be fine."

Of course, Washington hitting more shots against Mount Saint Mary's meant there were fewer offensive rebound attempts for Tshiebwe. For the first time this season, Tshiebwe failed to hit the 20-rebound plateau, settling for "only" 16 rebounds with five offensive boards.

While the West Virginia transfer is not backing down from his goal of averaging 20 rebounds per game, even he is OK if fewer opportunities come because Washington is living up to his potential.

"It was so good," Tshiebwe said. "We need him to make shots. ... The one thing I love about TyTy, that kid he does not care. He's so humble. Even if he does good, even if he does bad, he's still the same energy. That's what we needed."

Cowboy and Alien: Kentucky's Daimion Collins a 'blank slate' with a limitless ceiling

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Nov. 16

John Calipari has signed a staggering 49 five-star recruits at Kentucky, but never one quite like this. The word "alien" gets tossed around a lot with freakishly long athletes who can jump out of the gym. That term fits Daimion Collins, though, like a pair of the size-15 cowboy boots he slips into the stirrups attached to one of his two horses, DJ and Future. He's not from around here. In fact, aside from his Texas accent, it sometimes seems as if he's not from anywhere at all. As if somebody built a basketball machine with all of these crazy features, designed it to dominate, then forgot to program the thing and just dropped it out of the sky, into the winningest college

program in history.

"It's almost like coming from somewhere with no Internet and no television and moving to New York City," says Jai Lucas, the assistant coach who recruited Collins. "He was a top-10 player in the country who has never really played basketball. And that's actually an ideal thing for us. You're not having to rewire ideas that may not translate. For his basketball life, he's just been out there playing, so now we have a blank slate with all of this talent and we get to kind of develop it and help him become the best version of himself."

That will be a mutually beneficial endeavor.

Imagine a ceiling. Really tall one. Vaulted all the way to the roof. Now imagine you need to reach that lofty ceiling, perhaps to hang something in the rafters. Collins might be a good guy to ask. He's 6-foot-9. His wingspan is 7-5. He has a 42-inch vertical leap. He looks and acts like a Pogo Stick, never on the ground long, bounding higher with every bounce. And when Collins took flight Friday night at Rupp Arena against Robert Morris, unleashing the most sensational slam dunk that building has seen in years, it was a breathtaking reminder that no player on Kentucky's roster is better equipped to help the Wildcats reach their ceiling.

"He needs to play," Calipari said after the air show. "He's in the making. We've just gotta play him."

Oh, sure, there are far more experienced players, a number of guys who are more polished, more physically mature, more ready to make major contributions right now, today, one week into this new season. Collins showed up this summer in Lexington still just 18 years old, weighing only 185 pounds, looking like somebody slipped a basketball jersey over a pair of stilts. He came from a tiny town near the convergence of Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas, a place where getting a McDonald's franchise was about as big a deal to the roughly 5,000 residents as producing a McDonald's All-American. "Really no hoopsters there," Collins says. Many folks in Atlanta, Texas, know him best as the tallest person they've ever seen in a saddle. Not a lot of stores there, or anywhere, sell his size blue jeans: 32-inch waist, 40-inch inseam.

"We knew it was going to be different because of where we come from," his mother, Kim, says. "A lot of guys who go off to Kentucky are coming from much bigger schools or prep schools where they've been playing better competition and getting all this extra training for years. We just knew going into it that this was going to be a challenge for him. But that's something he wanted. He could've gone to another school and played a lot and not have to

worry about anything, but he wanted what Kentucky had to offer because he came from a small town and needed to learn a lot.”

And so for once, for all those reasons, Calipari signed a five-star recruit whose hype wasn't completely out of control before he even played a game. Collins, who wore rec specs in high school, looks like he could touch his toes without bending over and absolutely dominated a bunch of undersized kids in Texas who would've rather been playing football, has so far been mostly a circus-like curiosity. In a rare twist, these Wildcats have a veteran safety net: juniors Keion Brooks, Jacob Toppin and Oscar Tshiebwe will dominate the front-court rotation. There's likely not a lottery pick in that bunch, but they're all quality college players. They and the transfer portal additions dominating the minutes in the backcourt made it possible to go toe-to-toe with Duke in the opener despite only one freshman, guard TyTy Washington, playing more than two minutes.

Collins, the 12th-ranked high school prospect in the Class of 2021, played just 100 seconds in his college debut. This roster is solid enough for the Wildcats to get back to the NCAA Tournament no matter what Collins gives them. That's the unusual luxury he has. And they have. There's no real rush, no immediate pressure. Kentucky should be good, maybe even really good, whether Collins blossoms by the end of his freshman year or not. But great? If we're talking about a ceiling for this team, that very much depends on how Collins develops over the next four months.

“That's it exactly. That's really fair,” says Lucas, a former Texas player and assistant who has been tracking the wiry big man for years. “Because you're not relying on the freshmen as much as you have in the past, because you have a little more substance and stability early with the older guys, when the freshmen eventually do click and become what you think they can be, that's when you take another jump. If it starts to click somewhere around January or February, now you're really in business.”

And what is it, exactly, that folks think Collins might become?

Blake Griffin's brother, Taylor, is the president of Team Griffin, the Nike-affiliated grassroots squad that Collins won a 16U Peach Jam title with in 2019. He says Collins is already an elite shot blocker. “One of the best I've seen in the high school game,” Griffin says. But long-term, “he's got an incredible ceiling.” There's that word again. Even after watching Collins average an absurd 35.2 points, 14.4 rebounds, 7.0 assists and 6.2 blocks against inferior high school competition and win Gatorade Player of the Year in Texas, most folks are

still just using their imagination to conjure what he'll ultimately look like.

“He has a special ceiling,” Lucas says. “He can be a lot of things, and that's the most exciting part about him. He can mold himself into really anything. His ceiling is whatever he wants to make it, and he has that work ethic to make it happen.”

The plan was to take that process slow. The kid never even lifted weights before arriving at Kentucky, after all. While he measured highly at the team's pro day last month, Collins also managed just one rep on the 185-pound bench press — and that was progress. Everyone else got the bar up at least four times. For his first eight weeks on campus this summer, Collins' No. 1 job was to eat. The strength coach and team nutritionist put him on a daily 5,000-calorie diet. Even now, the last thing he does before bed is slurp down his third protein shake of the day.

“It was a big shock,” says Collins, who has already gained 17 pounds. His body fat percentage actually dropped even as he significantly bulked up. And still, he's only 202 pounds on a heavy day. “When we first started lifting, my body was real sore all the time. But I've gotten better at it, and my body has gotten used to it. That's always been my downfall, my weight, and I knew I had to gain to be able to compete. It was a big adjustment coming here. Other people are athletic like me, the game speed is way faster, and I'm definitely having to catch up. That's why I came here with an open mind. However long it takes, that's what it takes.”

Talk about an alien. Five-star kid who doesn't already have one foot out the door? Unheard of, especially around here. To be clear, Collins aspires to play in the NBA just like everyone else at Kentucky. It's just that there's no hurry. To use Lucas' analogy, the kid would like to get comfortable sending email before he tries to conquer Non-Fungible Tokens, even if he's already signed a name, image and likeness deal with a cryptocurrency company that offers NFTs.

“The family has very reasonable expectations,” Lucas says. “They understand where he was. Kids these days have skill trainers and workout guys and strength coaches starting in middle school. He's never had none of that. So they had very real expectations. And what's so refreshing is he understood and they understood that where he wants to go and what he wants to do in basketball, he needed this type of environment for him to be successful.”

When Kentucky told him to bulk up, Collins did what he'd always seen in the movies: eggs, eggs and more eggs. Dietician Monica Fowler spent those early days walking him through meals.

“One thing athletes have a hard time

understanding is that a lot of protein won't necessarily help you gain. When people are trying to lose weight, they go on a low-carb, high-protein diet, right?” Fowler says. “So when we first started, I'd come over to the lodge for breakfast, and Daimion would come out with this huge omelet. I would say, ‘OK, let's do half that omelet, add some french toast and get you some juice.’ We had to help him understand that carbs and energy help you build muscle. Basketball players can burn 600 calories in an hour of playing, so we can't send him into a two-hour practice without some fuel.”

A day in the life of a 5,000-calorie plan during summer workouts: juice and a pack of Gatorade chews before conditioning drills (so you don't barf), a breakfast of apple juice, eggs and french toast or biscuits and gravy, a shake or snack two hours later, two chicken sandwiches for lunch, another shake or snack two hours after that, a big bowl of pasta and vegetables for dinner, an evening snack and then a shake before bed. On days they lifted weights, a snack as he walked in the door, a Gatorade throughout the workout, a fruit smoothie with added protein immediately after. Oh, and if he woke up in the middle of the night?

“Just go ahead and drink another protein shake. If you can't sleep, eat!” Fowler says. “That has been and is going to be a hard part of his job here. And it is a job to eat like that. Sometimes, you just don't feel like it. You just aren't hungry. When you're tall and lean like Daimion is, gaining weight is really difficult. You have to think about the fact that he's so young and he's probably not finished going through puberty, and your calorie needs are off the charts during that time. So we're asking him not only to finish going through puberty while you're on TV and everybody is watching and commenting on everything you do, but we also want you to eat from morning to night and try to hold that weight.”

Collins calls Fowler “a real sweet lady,” but adds playfully that she is mighty aggressive about texting him to check in on the diet. Not that he's complaining. During daily FaceTime calls with his mom, Collins now routinely steps back from the camera to flex and show off his new muscles.

“He's real proud,” she says. “I was looking at some pictures the other day from just a year ago, when he wasn't even 180 pounds, and it's a total transformation.”

But also a constant battle. When another five-star string bean, Marcus Lee, was at Kentucky, Fowler says he'd sometimes lose 10 pounds overnight. Willie Cauley-Stein, who had a semi-famous rant about his need for pregame hot dogs, was the same. He didn't start really holding weight until his junior year, when he blew up and became the national defensive player of

the year and a top-10 draft pick. So does Collins have that kind of patience? Maybe not.

Calipari said Collins was “crushed” by barely playing in the opener at Madison Square Garden. Collins pleaded for a chance to defend Duke’s star freshman forward, Paolo Banchemo, and maybe Calipari should’ve let him. But the ease-him-in plan might be out the window now.

Collins played 21 minutes Friday in a 40-point rout of Robert Morris and produced: 14 points on 7-of-8 shooting, six rebounds, four blocks, three assists and a steal. His first career bucket came on a lob from Wheeler. His second on an offensive rebound, pump fake and spin move for the score inside. He swatted a 3-point attempt on which he was still at the free-throw line when the shooter rose up. He stalked a driver from the perimeter and spiked a floater off the backboard. He helped off his man to reject a double-clutch attempt in the lane, catching it on his way down. He reached way back to cram a pick-and-roll lob from Washington, monster-slammed a pick-and-roll lob from Dontae Allen, and then sent the crowd into an absolute frenzy with a dunk that ended up No. 1 on “SportsCenter’s” top plays.

“He texted me after the game: I got my chance and I was ready,” his mother says. “He knows whenever Coach Cal calls his name, he has to make the most of it.”

Here’s what making the most of it looks like: With 2:13 to go against Robert Morris, Wheeler stole the ball and started a break. He attacked, then stopped and shuttled the ball back to Collins, who trailed the play and streaked down the lane. A couple of steps inside the free-throw line, Collins launched from the middle of the SEC logo like it was a trampoline. He reached for the ceiling, and damn if it didn’t look like he might actually touch it. At the apex, his eyes were even with the rim and the ball in his outstretched right hand was above the square on the backboard. He thundered down the dunk and everyone in the building went wild. Soon after, Collins put an exclamation point on the victory with a two-hand flush in transition for the last of UK’s 100 points.

“It was going to happen,” Lucas says. “You just didn’t know when. You always hope sooner than later. And look, he had a good game, but he hasn’t arrived. He still has lots of stuff to work on. But it was good for him, good for his confidence, good for the team’s confidence, to realize you have somebody who is capable of stuff like that. Somebody who can give you that type of energy, block shots, run the floor, dunk everything, do things of that nature, it’s always reassuring.”

To understand where Collins is trying to

go, where he’s trying to help take Kentucky in the process, you have to understand where he came from. No, he was not dropped out of the sky. He also didn’t ride in on a horse, but he could’ve.

His great grandparents were horse people, and he grew up riding them. He’s owned as many as seven, but just has the two now. He might ride them in basketball shorts or his impossibly long-legged jeans. Yes, people always ask if his feet can touch the ground while on horseback. And yes, they can, depending on the horse. He’s in a horse club and meets up with friends for 10-mile trail rides back home. Because what else would a teenager do for fun in Atlanta, Texas, anyway?

“Something to go to? We don’t have one,” Collins says. “Nowhere in Atlanta like that. There’s really not much to tell about my town. Everyone knows everyone. You know how small towns are.”

“We have two grocery stores and two dollar stores. Well, three,” his mother adds. “There is no mall. It’s not fast-paced. We do have a McDonald’s. A Whataburger. A Dairy Queen and a Sonic. Oh, and a major highway runs through here. If you’re going to Houston, you’re going to pass through Atlanta.”

Several prep schools wanted Collins to come for his senior season. They promised better competition, a head start on that strength training program, a chance to see the world outside of Atlanta before he arrived in the spotlight at Kentucky. Collins’ parents thought long and hard about it, and they still aren’t sure they made the right decision, but COVID-19 was raging and they just couldn’t send him away. So now he’s outside of Atlanta for the first extended period in his life, and there’s definitely some culture shock involved. Sometimes that is uncomfortable, but sometimes it’s awesome.

That thing Lucas says about dropping an alien off in New York City? Kentucky did that last week. Collins’ first time in the city, he got out of a van in the middle of Times Square, looked up at a giant digital billboard and saw ... himself, larger than life.

“There aren’t many people from this area who make it out of here and go off to a big college or go off and experience things like he’s experiencing now,” Kim Collins says. “He’s just so thankful for all of it. It’s a surreal experience for him. We met the team down in Times Square to see the billboard that night, and it was another ‘wow’ moment for us. To see him there in those bright lights, it was like, ‘Wow, that’s my kid up there.’”

He looked so big, no ceiling seemed too high.

‘We’re gonna be fine’: John Calipari is still bullish on Kentucky’s outlook after Duke loss

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Nov. 10

NEW YORK — John Calipari did not duck out of Madison Square Garden quickly or quietly. He did not limp away licking his wounds, either, as Tuesday night ticked into Wednesday morning. Hell, if you didn’t know the score, you’d have thought Calipari’s team won its season-opening game here at the Champions Classic. The way he held court in the news conference afterward, laughing at his own jokes and leaving the moderator exasperated over a running gag about how a sputtering appliance in the back sounded like a barking dog. Calipari did not seem to be feeling much pain, certainly not misery, after a 79-71 defeat at the hands of Duke.

He was oddly ... fine? Barring a rematch in the NCAA Tournament, this was his last crack at longtime nemesis Mike Krzyzewski. Coach Cal, a Hall of Famer himself, had just served as a sacrificial lamb on the first leg of Coach K’s season-long farewell tour — and yet here he was yammering on about the bottle of Pappy Van Winkle bourbon he’d brought to the retirement party. When it was over, all the cameras and microphones finally off, Calipari found himself among friends in the bowels of this historic building, and he was still smiling.

“The Garden. The Mecca. What’s better than this?” he said. “This place was nuts tonight, huh?”

And boy, had it been. The first real crowd either of these teams had played in front of since March 2020 was absolutely delirious, some 18,000 folks making a joyful and thunderous noise as two blue-bloods traded blows. It was a draw after 25 minutes. Even after Duke’s two star freshmen, Trevor Keels and Paolo Banchemo, briefly blew the game open, a 15-point lead in a blink, the Wildcats did not wilt. The building shook again as Kentucky’s one-man wrecking crew, Oscar Tshiebwe, willed his team back to within four on a three-point play with 6:07 remaining.

But Keels (25 points) and Banchemo (22) kept coming, and the star freshman Calipari thought he had, TyTy Washington, never did. He got swallowed up by the moment, hit just 3 of 14 shots, and his struggle heaped too much of the backcourt burden upon Sahvir Wheeler. The 5-foot-9 Georgia transfer finished with 16 points and 10 assists and was positively brilliant in the first half. But Wheeler played every moment of the second half, 38 minutes total, and found himself trying to do too much with too little gas left down the stretch. He coughed up five second-half turnovers and got consecutive shots swatted after driving

into a thicket of tree-sized Blue Devils.

As Calipari stepped into the elevator at MSG afterward, one of his old friends was trying to remember the terrific backcourt duo he had on that Final Four team at Massachusetts in 1996. Carmelo Travieso and Edgar Padilla, Calipari told him.

"You sure could use those guys," the man said.

Calipari stopped him right there.

"No," he said. "I love my guards. Love them. I hugged TyTy in there. He just needed to hear that I still love him. And I do. He's gonna be fine. We're gonna be fine."

Disappointing though it must've been to lose another one to Krzyzewski and Duke, to see a recruit he'd pursued so feverishly (Banchemo) bury his team at the end, that's probably the right way to look at this night for Kentucky. The Wildcats did enough encouraging things on opening night against a really good team to believe they can figure this thing out, as nearly every Calipari-coached squad had until the disaster of last season, by March.

Calipari has had his teeth kicked in by Duke before, had high preseason hopes blown to bits by the Blue Devils on opening night. With five minutes to go in a 34-point loss at the 2018 Champions Classic, he told players that if any of them committed a foul to prolong the suffering they'd have to find their own ride home. "I want to be out of this building" as fast as humanly possible, Calipari explained then. That was a total humiliation. This was not that.

Calipari knows what a hopeless roster looks like. Last year's nine-win nightmare was fueled by ill-fitting parts, a pandemic and a total lack of chemistry. What we saw Tuesday not was not that. The difference?

"We fought, to be honest," junior Jacob Toppin said. "We definitely fought. We shot 37.7 percent and we were still in the game. So we definitely fought as a group. I'm proud of this team and what we did today."

We can see now why Calipari kept searching for one more big man deep into the summer, because Kentucky was absolutely outmanned in the frontcourt. And still, the Cats scrapped. Duke had 6-10, 250-pound Banchemo, 7-foot, 242-pound Mark Williams and 6-9, 242-pound Theo John. The Wildcats had ... 6-9, 255-pound Tshiebwe, and that's about all. It was nearly enough. Tshiebwe elevated rebounding to an art form in this game, attacking the glass as if he'd have to walk home from New York unless Kentucky won.

He set a Champions Classic record and tied UK records for most boards in a debut and most by any Calipari-era player with 19 rebounds, grabbing a dozen offensive boards, and he scored 17 points.

"If you really want to help your team,

you got to fight," Tshiebwe said, "so I was going for everything."

Four Duke players, including Banchemo, cramped up during the game. Two of them needed IVs. But Tshiebwe looked inexhaustible and earned the admiration of his formidable opponent in the process.

"We did what we could, but obviously that's what he does," Banchemo said. "He was on the boards heavy. He was challenging us, the bigs, and made it hard for us. A lot of respect to him."

Nobody on last season's team could have done what Tshiebwe did Tuesday. That's a low bar, sure, and Kentucky aspires to something much bigger than just being less terrible. Or simply not embarrassing itself. Or being decent again. The Cats don't want pats on the head from Duke; they want to smash Duke over the head. The expectation is to contend for a national championship, and Calipari knows that. So his evaluation of what went down against Duke wasn't through the lens of lowered standards.

Warts and all, he surveyed the scene and walked out of MSG believing he can do something with this group. He is certain Washington will be better than he showed in the first game of his college career. And to be clear, he has to be for any lofty goals to be realistic.

"TyTy played the way he did because we kind of wanted him to," Calipari said, explaining that the staff had prodded Washington to be more assertive offensively. Because they're going to need that from him. So they let him try to find his way Tuesday, and it just never materialized. "So I will take responsibility," Calipari said.

But Tshiebwe is a beast. Toppin gave great energy. Wheeler looks like he can run a team. And Davidson transfer Kellan Grady showed off a sweet stroke, swishing three corner 3s in pivotal moments — although Calipari will need to self-evaluate about why Grady went missing for big stretches in the second half.

This was not a game for string bean freshman Daimion Collins, a top-10 recruit who barely played, but he's still an intriguing prospect. Sharp-shooting Iowa transfer C.J. Fredrick didn't play in this one because he's just now coming back from injury. Who would've thought Kentucky could get nine total points from its freshmen and be within striking distance of Duke in the final five minutes?

"I loved our fight. I loved our competitive spirit," Calipari said. "Now, some guys gotta step up."

He rattled off a list of previous freshmen who didn't start hot at Kentucky but finished that way. Guys who weren't top-10 recruits but were lottery picks by the end of their freshman year. Shai Gilgeous-Alex-

ander and Tyler Herro, to name a couple.

"This team has some guys. I don't know which guys will do it, but they gotta step up," Calipari said. "(Duke's) two top-five players played like top-five players. Now, if you want to be them, then step your game up. I think we'll be able to do some of that, but it all starts with fight."

Because Kentucky had that on opening night, Calipari had confidence this was just the beginning.

These Cats are making scratch: Even before tipping off, Kentucky players cash in on NIL deals

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Nov. 9

On the eve of college basketball's opening night, a perfect encapsulation of the sport's new name, image and likeness era flashed across a giant digital billboard in New York's Times Square. Several Kentucky players appeared on the screen, in their uniforms, in an ad for Morgan & Morgan, which bills itself as the largest personal injury law firm in the country. So when the Wildcats face Duke just around the corner at Madison Square Garden on Tuesday night in the Champions Classic, they can honestly say it's a business trip. And business is booming.

Before their first game, Kentucky's players have already signed 180 NIL deals, ranging from a couple hundred dollars for social media posts all the way up to six-figure blockbusters. And that's just the basketball team. In late October, Texas announced 175 NIL deals to date for its entire athletic department, only 11 in men's basketball. So far, this new frontier has revealed an old truth: The Kentucky brand is mighty valuable.

"They're a national powerhouse, always have the five-stars and big names coming in, and partnering a brand like that with our brand was a win-win situation," says Morgan & Morgan partner Dan Morgan, whose father was born and raised in Lexington and is a diehard Cats fan. "We started the year before, advertising inside Rupp Arena, a deal with the school and a relationship with (media-rights holder) JMI which then gave us the ability on this deal to use their actual jerseys and logos. Without that component, the messaging just isn't as strong. Taking all of it together, a face that's familiar, the jersey they've known forever and the logo, paired with Morgan & Morgan, the brand affiliation is through the roof."

The total value of UK's NIL deals so far has not been disclosed, but it is already in the seven figures, a source said. That number doesn't include merchandise sales or Cameo, for which players are only required to inform the school what they'll

charge per T-shirt or video message and don't have to follow up with a tally of those transactions. That number also doesn't yet include paid autograph signings, which should be a massive market for the Cats. The bottom line, which John Calipari has hammered into the players' minds, is that if they win big on the court, they'll score even bigger off it.

"We feel like we're doing really well — especially considering the season hasn't even started — but we're doing it in a way that is not distracting the players from basketball or from school," says T.J. Beisner, UK's new director of player development and point person on all things NIL. "So much of what we've done so far has been about building up awareness of who our guys are. We want you to like our guys and see who they are, get them out in the community and get them engaged and put a personality on them before the season starts, which I think has been successful. That's how most of these NIL opportunities have been created so far. But once we start playing basketball, they'll be created in a different way. They'll be created by value on the court."

Five-star freshman TyTy Washington, by virtue of a winning smile, outsized personality and the expectation that he will be Kentucky's best player this season, has become the program's first NIL superstar. If he's as good as advertised, Washington could easily make his first \$1 million by spring. He's already signed major deals with Gatorade, Porsche of Louisville, America's Best Caviar, Airborne Athletics and T.R.A.P. House clothing, in addition to several team-wide deals the Wildcats have negotiated together. And that last part might be the most important: Everybody on the roster is getting paid — almost. Even the walk-ons are included in some of the group deals, and one of them, Brennan Canada, has really leaned into the celebrity that comes with a spot on the end of Kentucky's bench. He earns a few hundred bucks per sponsored Instagram post and offers anything from birthday wishes to pep talks to gender reveal videos on Cameo for \$25 a pop.

By law, companies can't actually do group licensing agreements with the Wildcats, so the so-called team-wide deals are actually individual contracts offered to each player separately. That also allows top players to negotiate for a bigger piece of the pie, or to opt out. Washington was the only Kentucky player who did not sign the recent deal with FTX, a cryptocurrency exchange that is going to pay the Cats monthly, because he and his agent are working another angle in that sector. Other companies who inked NIL deals with most of the team include ProCamps, Kroger and

Gen.G Esports, which paid them to play video games with fans before Big Blue Madness last month. Every scholarship player was offered the Morgan & Morgan deal, which will include billboards in Lexington as well as the one in New York, but Dontaie Allen missed the photo shoot due to a family emergency. The law firm is working on a separate deal of equal value with Allen, the state's former Mr. Basketball.

"It's really good in terms of volume, but also how it's split," Beisner says of Kentucky's collective NIL haul so far. "I could not be happier with how it's played out. What has surprised me is how smooth it's gone, honestly. I heard for years, 'You start giving players money, then what's gonna happen?' Well, nothing has changed with our guys, except they've become more responsible and more engaged in their daily life because they have to understand their finances better and they have to think about their branding and how they're perceived. It's given us a chance to educate the players on taxes and negotiations and public speaking and a lot of things that are valuable in the world of business. A lot of my job from now until April is reminding them constantly about taxes: Who's your person? How are you doing it?"

"What we talk about in recruiting all the time is what you do in the NBA is going to dwarf what you do in NIL, so don't let NIL get in the way of NBA. We're here to protect them and educate them and make sure they're not doing anything now they'll regret later."

Calipari has also encouraged his players to pay forward their new financial good fortune, and they responded in August with a public request that any business opportunity presented to the team include a plan for a 10 percent donation to charity. Washington on Monday announced the formation of the TyTy Washington Foundation, which will provide gift cards during the holiday season for single mothers, students with a 4.0 grade-point average and nominated teachers from high schools in Kentucky and his home state of Arizona. He has already leveraged NIL partnerships to donate backpacks and school supplies to elementary school children in Tempe, a Dr. Dish shooting machine to a high school in Lexington and Nike sneakers to girls and boys basketball teams.

"My favorite story out of this is TyTy got that Porsche and one of the first things he did with it was load up four or five of his teammates and go pack food for God's Pantry for elementary school kids who are food insecure and then they went and dropped it off," Beisner says. "TyTy getting a Porsche is really cool. Great for TyTy, great talking point for us, but it's especially

cool in that context. 'What's a college kid gonna do with a Porsche?' Well, for one, he's going to take his teammates to do something good in the community."

Junior center Oscar Tshiebwe, who is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is the only player on Kentucky's roster who cannot sign any of these NIL deals. He's in the United States on a student visa, which restricts him from working. The only loophole so far seems to be Cameo, where Tshiebwe is charging \$20 for individuals and \$105 for businesses that want him to record a customized video message. Perhaps the most likable and photogenic player on the roster is missing out on all the big-money deals, however.

"We want to make it work if we can, but we are waiting on the lawyers to tell us what he can and can't do," Beisner says. "Oscar is working through his own lawyer to interpret the rules and file paperwork. When I was that age, if all of my friends were making money and I couldn't, I would be frustrated. But Oscar's not wired like that. I don't know that I've ever seen Oscar get frustrated by anything. In the meantime, the plan for him from a branding standpoint is the same as everybody else: Help people fall in love with him, and when it's his time to make money on it, he'll be in the best possible position.

"I heard once that someone told Magic Johnson, 'You have a million-dollar talent but a billion-dollar smile. Let your talent take you where your smile can make you.' That really applies to Oscar, who is gifted at basketball, but man, if you get to know him and see his smile and hear his laugh, that's a brand right there. So if we get to that point, Oscar will have some great opportunities."

Beisner's job didn't exist last season at Kentucky. It still doesn't at a lot of schools. Basketball operations staffers have assumed many of his same responsibilities, but they're also still booking flights and reserving hotel rooms and any number of tasks that don't allow for a full-time focus on players' off-the-court needs. Calipari created the position, with a heavy NIL focus, because it felt to him like the next frontier. If he wanted to keep landing elite high school talent, he'd better have a good plan to share with prospects and their parents.

Three top-10 recruits have committed to Kentucky since it launched this new initiative, and now the Wildcats have four five-star pledges and the No. 1-ranked class in the country for 2022.

"When there was an inkling that name, image and likeness would really become a thing, Coach did a good job of putting an infrastructure around us," junior forward Keion Brooks says. "So when it did come to

fruition, we'd have some great opportunities. Kentucky has a huge platform, and our infrastructure has been great for giving us the right guidance to tread this new water."

Neither Beisner nor anyone at Kentucky can pitch or negotiate NIL deals, but if a company calls and wants to partner with players, Beisner can put them in contact. He can also address the players' questions about opportunities that have been presented. He talks to them about what good and bad deals look like and brings in guest speakers to counsel the players on what makes them attractive for sponsorships. If a player tells Beisner he'd love to endorse Xbox or Playstation, they have a conversation about how to brand yourself as a gamer.

When recruits visit, the thing parents are most impressed by is the level of thought that has gone into this. The numbers don't even really come up, Beisner says.

"That's what fans assume, that this is like a negotiation," Beisner says. "But none of these kids are asking, 'How much money am I going to make?' Every kid and family sits down and says, 'What's the opportunity,' and we talk about that, and then they say, 'How are you going to make sure my kid doesn't mess up his financial future while he's at Kentucky?' And that goes right in line with what we've been saying all along: We'll support you here so that you can go support yourself in a massive way at the next level, where you can make hundreds of millions of dollars. You should do well here, better than you can anywhere else, but the message about the bigger picture has been so successful."

Everyone involved also understands this: The bigger picture begins Tuesday night at MSG. Because winners make much better pitchers.

Kentucky basketball game against Miles College serves 'a greater cause'

By Jerry Tipton | Lexington Herald-Leader
Nov. 3

Kentucky's exhibition game Friday against Miles College, one of this country's Historically Black Colleges and Universities, is the latest example of John Calipari seeking to help where he sees help is needed.

It follows the announcement of Kentucky starting a "Unity Series," which will be games in the next five seasons against HBCU teams from the Southwestern Athletic Conference. The first game will be against Sean Woods-coached Southern on Dec. 7.

In partnership with the McLendon Foundation, Calipari was also instrumental in the launching of the Minority Leadership

Initiative, which seeks to help people begin careers in athletics.

"It speaks to the character of the man," said P.G. Peeples, the president and CEO of the Lexington Urban League. "Cal is a caring person who just always wants to do the right thing in terms of humanity."

When asked why Calipari seeks to help in this way, Peeples said, "He told me that his mother always told him to pay forward. And he said he's always tried to live up to that."

This way of life predates Calipari's arrival as Kentucky coach by decades.

Anton Brown, who played for Calipari's UMass teams of the late 1980s and early 1990s, recalled a telling example from that time. On a road trip, the UMass players happened to be watching an episode of an award-winning PBS documentary titled "Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement."

The series covered the years from 1954 to the mid-1980s and noted such events as Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus and the murders of Emmitt Till and Martin Luther King Jr.

"A lot of guys were blown away by stuff they were seeing," Brown said. "So, they were like, you know what, we're not going to go to practice today. We're going to boycott."

Calipari was in the hotel lobby waiting for his players to gather before riding a bus to the gym. He called Brown, the team captain, to ask, where is everybody?!

When Brown told him about the PBS series, Calipari came to the room and joined the players in watching the documentary.

"He almost came to tears," Brown said. "And he told the players, hey, you know what? We're not practicing today."

Recalling this about 30 years later, Brown said, "I have a lot of respect for him for doing that."

When asked how Friday's exhibition game came about, Miles College Coach Fred Watson said UK contacted the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference seeking a recommendation of an opponent.

"With his sensitivity to HBCUs and our plight, Coach Cal wanted to play an HBCU," Watson said.

Coincidentally, Watson is a longtime friend of Brown. The two share the hometown of Columbia, S.C., and played together on teams as young men.

That Calipari sought an HBCU team to play did not surprise the Miles College coach.

"I'm a follower of Coach Cal," Watson said. "I know his heart. I know what he's doing for us. I know how impactful he's trying to be. It's just awareness."

Watson expressed gratitude for the

"pretty good" financial guarantee Miles College will receive.

"It's going to make a huge difference," he said. "Obviously, our budget can't provide a lot. Our budget covers things we have to do. There are things you just want to do. This guarantee will allow us to do things we just want to do."

A film room and extra pairs of shoes are among the things his program wants to do that the guarantee will allow, Watson said.

"When you're at an HBCU, there are a lot of people who do a lot of lip service and are aware," Watson said. "But (Calipari) actually has an intentional plan behind his awareness. When he puts a plan in place to help, he's putting actions to words."

Of course, there can be blowback.

Criticism erupted on social media when Calipari joined the UK players in kneeling during the national anthem before last season's game at Florida to call attention to systemic racism. Likewise, social media criticism followed the UK coach joining the players in wearing a Black Lives Matter T-shirt for a video produced during last year's preseason.

While acknowledging that such actions can help team bonding and recruiting, Watson said there is risk.

"It also could affect his donors," the Miles College coach said. "But when something is in your heart, you can't be political. That's how you know it's genuine because he takes those risks (in the service) of a greater cause."

C.B. Akins, the retired pastor of Lexington's First Baptist Church Bracktown, said he considered Calipari's actions "appropriate." Akins, a member of UK's Board of Trustees from 2011 to 2017, pointed out that a majority of the players are Black.

"How can you ask a team to be with you and believe in you when you're not with the team and you don't believe in your team?" said Akins before adding, "HBCUs are the primary producers of Black doctors and lawyers and engineers. I think he's taking advantage of the opportunity he has in his position to really make sure a school like that has a lift."

Peeples expects this social awareness and active response will continue into the future.

"He always talks about teaching his players to share, teaching his players to pay forward," Peeples said of Calipari. "That is the best example for them to see how to do it. I think the record shows that his players have paid heed to that."

Of the 10 seasons the NBA has given a Community Assist Award, two have gone to former UK players: John Wall in 2015-16 and Devin Booker in 2020-21.

Former UK players have received the monthly recognition eight times: Anthony

Davis three times, DeMarcus Cousins twice, Booker twice and Wall once.

Calipari, Amaker spearhead national minority hiring initiative

By Michael Smith | Sports Business Journal
Nov. 2

When Kentucky men's basketball coach John Calipari hangs up his whistle one day, he hopes he'll be remembered for the impact he made on minority hiring in college sports as much as his national championship.

Calipari and Harvard coach Tommy Amaker, the former Duke great, have been the driving force behind a minority hiring program that, in barely more than a year, already is creating job candidates in college athletics and placing them on campuses across the country.

The program is called the McLendon Minority Leadership Initiative, an extension of the McLendon Foundation, which operates under the umbrella of the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics. Organizers already are calling this the most effective and powerful program for diversity hiring in college athletics. Even though basketball coaches were the first to get behind the new initiative, the program promotes opportunities for coaches and administrators alike.

The first edition of the program in 2020-21 funded yearlong internships for 30 minority candidates — the program calls them Future Leaders. They are required to have a bachelor's degree and go through an interview process before they are selected.

Calipari and Amaker teamed up to get the program off the ground in July 2020 by donating more than \$1 million, money that went to supporting these Future Leaders so that they would have a paid internship rather than unpaid.

Those first 30 Future Leaders completed internships in July at 24 different schools including Kentucky, Harvard, Georgetown, Maryland, Miami and Alabama, among others. Of those 30, 19 already have found full-time jobs, mostly in collegiate athletic departments in fields such as compliance, marketing, development and social media/digital design.

A handful of others have secured jobs outside of athletic departments at the ACC, National Association of Basketball Coaches and the Charlotte Hornets.

The number of Future Leaders in the 2021-22 internship program has grown to 41.

McDonald's joined the initiative as its first corporate sponsor, donating to support the program.

Calipari said that 80 coaches across

multiple sports are now offering their support, from Mike Krzyzewski at Duke to Nick Saban at Alabama.

It's a movement Calipari dreamed about last year after George Floyd's murder and the resulting social and racial unrest.

"My wife said, 'Why don't you quit talking about it and do something about it,'" Calipari said. "So, we started thinking about how we can provide opportunities for men and women of color in athletic departments so that they can become athletic directors. And then, hopefully, that would lead to hiring more coaches of color."

Richard Lapchick's annual Division I report on race and gender hiring in 2020 illustrated the need for such a program. He looked at 399 campus leadership positions. Just 40 were filled by Black men and women and 19 were filled by Hispanic men and women, highlighting the lack of diversity among decision-makers.

"The ultimate success would be for every institution that has athletics to participate in this," Amaker said.

Calipari's initial idea was to launch the program at Kentucky with five internships. The more he talked to people, the more the concept grew.

He needed administrative help, which is where NACDA entered the picture. The association's CEO, Bob Vecchione, saw the potential in the initiative, and NACDA brought on Adrien Harraway from Virginia's athletic department to be a NACDA vice president and direct the McLendon Foundation as well as the leadership initiative. Harraway attended Arizona State for graduate school and earned his master's while on a McLendon minority scholarship, and now he has the opportunity to lead this fledgling internship initiative that will help launch careers.

"It's so cool for me to be a part of this melding of sports and education because they're both core values of mine," Harraway said. "One thing that we stress is that these internships are not about going to get coffee and shredding papers. These are meaningful positions that provide meaningful experience and great exposure."

As Calipari said, "It's not a handout, it's a hand up."

"Nothing changes by people making a bunch of statements," he said. "We've got to stop talking and do something about the lack of diversity in college athletics, so that's what we're doing. At the end of the day, when I'm done, I hope they talk about this program, even more than basketball. I hope it can make that much of a difference."

Who's been the most surprising Kentucky basketball player in the preseason practices?

By Ben Roberts | Lexington Herald Leader
Oct. 20

A simple question — asked of nearly a dozen Kentucky basketball players and coaches at the team's annual Media Day event Wednesday — kept getting the same response.

"Who's been surprising you the most in these early practices?" they were all asked. There was additional explanation that this could be a player who was better than expected, a player who had already progressed more than previously predicted, or simply a player who had been impressive in these early practice sessions.

Some guys brought up multiple names. Others singled out just one Wildcat.

Point guards Sahvir Wheeler and TyTy Washington were mentioned more than once.

Freshman Daimion Collins has been wowed by Wheeler's creativity as a passer, while junior forward Keion Brooks didn't know the Georgia transfer was so quick until he saw him every day in practice. Veteran guard Davion Mintz noted that Washington, a freshman, plays with a pace usually reserved for older players, that onlookers would think he'd been playing college ball for a while now.

Collins — a 6-foot-9 power forward with next-level athleticism — also worked his way into that honorable mention category. Teammates and coaches spoke of his raw ability — he can touch the top of the backboard, a few pointed out — while also talking up his actual basketball skills.

But the players who mentioned just one teammate all came up with the same name, usually shooting a head nod across the Memorial Coliseum court in his direction. And none of those who said more than one Wildcat had been "most surprising" left him off their lists.

That player was Bryce Hopkins, a four-star prospect who came to Lexington as the least-touted signee in UK's three-man recruiting class, a freshman often overlooked alongside his more highly ranked peers and the talented transfers and returnees on this Kentucky team.

Once the offseason hype ended and the practices began, Hopkins started turning heads.

UK Coach John Calipari has brought him up more than once already during the preseason — and he did so again Wednesday — noting that Hopkins was better than expected and talking positively of the way he plays a physical brand of basketball.

Listed at 6-6 and 220 pounds, Hopkins is no giant, but he is one of the bigger players

on this Kentucky team, and his teammates are getting the sense that he's one of the strongest on the court. He's also been showing off perimeter skills.

"I already knew that Bryce was good," Washington said. "But the stuff that he's been doing in practice — the way he dribbles and handles it and shoots, and just his size alone. He's physical. But he can also get low and play up and guard. So just seeing how he can play as a guard and as a '4,' that's really unique.

"I just feel like him being on the perimeter and him being able to shoot, too — he's been able to knock down a lot of shots from deep. And whenever he gets downhill, he's like a freight train coming at you. People tend to move out of the way when he's coming at you. It's either that or you foul him."

Junior forward Brennan Canada said Hopkins plays more like a "big guard" who can also go into the post and bang with physical forwards. Mintz has been impressed with the way Hopkins smartly uses his body to get into opponents, noting that he already plays like a college upperclassman.

Brooks, who is expected to play that similar "3-4" position for the Wildcats this season, knows the challenges of balancing skill and physicality in that role, and the former five-star recruit knows how difficult it can be to make the transition from high school. He, too, has been impressed with his young teammate.

"The physicality from high school to college is completely different," Brooks said. "And Bryce — a lot of times — is the enforcer. He's coming through, he's being physical and making strong plays. But along with that physicality, he's skilled, as well. And that's dangerous when somebody's that strong and athletic but also skilled — that's a tough guard. It's been great competing against him."

For his part, Hopkins said Collins had surprised him the most this preseason, adding that he's never seen a 6-9 player who can do the things his fellow freshman can on the court. Hopkins, who has come across as genuinely humble and unassuming in his early UK media sessions, also didn't attempt to feign surprise when told that every single one of his teammates had mentioned him by name when asked the same question.

"I think I've been doing pretty good," he said of his practices. "Like you said, a lot of people have been saying that I've surprised them. It hasn't been a surprise to me, just because I know the work that I've put in and the time I've spent in the gym. So I just look to keep opening up eyes and keep getting each other better in practice."

Hopkins was the No. 38 overall player in

the 2021 class, according to the 247Sports composite rankings. In a senior season that started late due to the COVID-19 pandemic — a circumstance that might have kept him from a higher recruiting ranking — the Chicago-area native averaged 24.4 points and 12.5 rebounds per game and earned Illinois player of the year honors.

He was lauded for his growing skill set — his coach said he shot nearly 40 percent from three-point range — but he's also long been known for his willingness to do the dirty work, if it helps make his team better.

Calipari pointed out Wednesday that a recent back injury had kept Hopkins out of practice for about a week before adding that he had since returned and was already "nudging his way up" the depth chart with his physical play, ability to rebound and positional versatility.

Asked what his role would be this season, Hopkins responded with a list, the order of which should please Kentucky's coaches.

"A guy that defends, gets rebounds, makes shots and gets players the ball," he said.

Defense and rebounding — those are two things that Calipari covets in his players, especially young ones trying to earn some playing time right off the bat.

Hopkins has proven he can score, shown he can shoot, and convinced his teammates that he can be trusted with the ball in his hands. The 19-year-old also knows there are plenty of other Wildcats who can do those things.

"I know, coming in, defense is going to keep you on the court. And rebounding," he said. "Those are the two things that they wanted me to do, so those are the things that I try to focus on. Because I know if I do those two things — I already know I can score the ball — but if I focus on those two things, I feel like that can put me over the edge and keep me on the court."

(Wild)cats and dogs living together: How Kentucky's Davion Mintz's spirit was lifted by Ghost, his French bulldog

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Oct. 11

Davion Mintz kept trying to put his finger on it. What's different? Something is different. He was playing the best basketball of his life this summer while training away from Kentucky's campus and weighing whether to begin a pro career or come back and use his extra year of NCAA eligibility. He felt lighter, looser and more sure of himself during those workouts, as he suddenly was "just killing guys at the gym," he says. Mintz had been the most reliable player on a bad team last season, leading

the Wildcats in minutes, points, assists and made 3-pointers, but now there was this next-level confidence coursing through the 6-foot-3 guard.

"I'm putting all the pieces together," Mintz says, "and I start asking myself: What changed?"

The answer finally slapped him across the face like a warm, slobbery tongue: my dog. Ghost, the nearly 1-year-old French bulldog he'd raised from birth, was by his side all summer. Dogs aren't allowed in the basketball lodge at Kentucky, and last season's strict COVID-19 protocols even kept two-legged creatures from congregating inside those walls. So after months of isolation, the reunion with Ghost had renewed Mintz's spirit in ways he never imagined. The human provided long walks and belly rubs, but the good boy offered complete devotion in return. Ghost sat outside the shower, drawn by the dueling sensations of a cool floor and warm mist, listening intently as Mintz discussed the pros and cons of his big decision.

"I talk to him like a human, and he turns his head like he understands me," Mintz says. "I think he knows what I'm after, what I'm trying to get, and he believes in me. That's my best friend. That's my son. I love that dude, because he really does support me emotionally, which I think is a dog's purpose in this world. So I decided: If I'm going back to school, I gotta have him with me this year."

Just like that, the Cats got a dog. Mintz returned to Kentucky, and Ghost came along as a registered emotional support animal. There was an extensive process involving a doctor's note, university paperwork and behavioral training for the dog, plus the most important piece: John Calipari's stamp of approval. That was the easy part.

"Cal is a dog lover," Mintz says, "and he understands the importance of his players' happiness. Even as we were losing last year, he would bring us in and have a conversation like, 'How's your mind? What can I do better for you?' And these weren't just passed-over conversations. It was like, 'No, literally, what are you doing when you go back to your room?' That's a coach who really cares. Yes, we're here to win basketball games. Yes, we're losing, and people think that's the end of the world. But he just kept asking, 'What's your mental state right now, and how can I help?' Even during the toughest part of the season, he really valued that. It wasn't just talk. He really meant it."

Calipari recently told The Athletic that last season, for the first time in his career, the job was more about monitoring his team's psyche than it was teaching Xs and Os. "Because I knew what it was doing to

individual players” to be sequestered while the Wildcats posted the program’s worst record in almost a century, he said. Insult to injury: Because of COVID, almost every interaction that team had with its fans occurred online.

SPOILER: Social media is not a space dominated by people who are looking on the bright side.

“They’ll say anything. They’ll talk down to players,” Mintz says. “And they don’t understand what it’s like to go through one single day of high-level basketball, how much of a toll it takes on your body and brain. Nothing about putting on a Kentucky uniform is easy. Nothing about last year was easy. I remember the lowest point, when you started to realize, we’re really not going to make the tournament, and all of the overthinking that came with it. What’s going to happen to my career after a season like this? That’s why mental health is important, especially playing at this level where everything you do is so public, because sometimes you just need to leave that space and clear your mind so it doesn’t overwhelm you.”

Now that Ghost is around, Mintz has little escapes built into every day. He takes the dog for meandering walks to enjoy the fresh air and forget about basketball for a few minutes at a time. When he dives back into the game, Ghost is there for that as well. They watch film together in the room they share at the lodge, where the animal is more popular than his owner. Team-mates borrow Ghost — sometimes for an hour, other times for the night — whenever they need a pick-me-up. The little guy has quickly grown on everybody.

“He’s like our little mascot,” Mintz says. “He’s found his home here too.”

When Mintz came to Kentucky last season without his dog and then the wheels came clean off the basketball team, his parents worried a little. They visited as often as possible, called him regularly and set up virtual family meals via FaceTime. He was no homesick freshman, having spent four years at Creighton already, but these were extraordinary times, and they needed to look him in the eye periodically to make sure the light wasn’t fading.

“It was really a season that parents learned how much our sons love this game,” Sean Mintz says. “No fans, no campus life, just kind of cooped up in their rooms and confined — it was really tough on those guys, and it was really tough on us parents to see our sons struggle with it. We feel a lot better knowing Ghost is there with him now. That’s why I’m just overwhelmed by how important things like this are for the mental health of these young men. It has made a big difference in Davion. It’s like having an extension of us

there with him. He knows at any time, he can feel at home, and I’m just so thankful to the university for allowing it.”

Davion’s parents have a photo of their son at age 4 with a stuffed Rottweiler he toted everywhere. In that photo, the boy and his toy dog are wearing the same Band-Aid on the same spot on their faces. Davion’s lifelong love of dogs comes directly from Sean, who started raising and training them at a young age. Sean grew up without his biological parents, raised by grandparents whose time and attention was mostly devoted to making ends meet.

“So I really learned to have a good relationship with a dog,” Sean says. “I didn’t know you could train a dog to be so intelligent or that something that can’t talk back can understand so well and make you feel so much better when he’s around. That was a huge deal for me, and I shared that story with my boys. I think that love of dogs transcended out of me into Davion. You should’ve seen the joy it brought him when they said he could bring his dog to Kentucky. And now Ghost is just a real spoiled buddy up there, isn’t?”

If Mintz and his dog were a package deal, that was a no-brainer for the Cats. He’s one of the most experienced players of the Calipari era, with 100 career college starts, 2,830 minutes, 925 points and 337 assists to his credit. He averaged a career-high 11.5 points last season, shot 38 percent from 3-point range and, as much as anyone can be during a 9-16 campaign, was Kentucky’s clutch shotmaker. He hit five 3-pointers in the final 100 seconds of SEC games that were still in doubt, including a game-winner against Vanderbilt.

“I’m happy he’s here. I love being around him,” Calipari says. “I said to his parents after last season, I can coach him for the next 10 years. He is that kind of person, player and leader.”

Mintz surprised Calipari when he told the coach that Kentucky saved his life last season. Really? You came expecting a Final Four run and instead finished seven games below .500, so how exactly did that save your life?

“Just having the ability to come and re-brand myself to show how passionate I am about this game, my skill set, how much I really put into this,” Mintz says. “Coming here under Coach Cal and developing that confidence that really gave me the ability to show the world, on this stage and this platform, my skill for shooting the ball. I was able to show little things at Creighton, but I really got to unleash myself here.”

He just didn’t get to win much in Lexington. But there is a high degree of confidence that’s about to change, and Mintz didn’t want to miss out. He came back for a super senior season despite the

fact Kentucky added instant-impact guards CJ Fredrick (Iowa transfer), Sahvir Wheeler (Georgia transfer), Kellan Grady (Davidson transfer) and TyTy Washington (five-star freshman). If his role is a little smaller and the Cats win a lot bigger, so be it.

“I didn’t want to just come here and get beat up and leave,” Mintz says. He and the other returning Wildcats — Keion Brooks, Lance Ware, Jacob Toppin, Dontaie Allen — have already noticed a change in the vibe from last season. “We talk about it all the time, like, ‘This is different.’ We’re actually able to be in front of people and feel the love, outside of social media, like actually in real life again. It’s crazy. The fan base here is ridiculous. That’s one of the reasons I came back, to be able to have that real experience.”

So what’s different? Everything is different.

CUP honors basketball legend Calipari

By Ron Wilshire | The Courier Express
Sept. 29

CLARION — The name of John Calipari was literally added to the basketball court of the legendary Waldo Tippin Gymnasium Natatorium last Tuesday night at Clarion University, as the court was dedicated to another legend, Calipari, a 1982 Clarion graduate who has gone on to coaching nationally ranked teams.

Currently head basketball coach at the University of Kentucky, Calipari has never forgotten his years as a star high school basketball player at Moon High School under Clarion graduate, coach Joe Sacco, or his years at Clarion University with Coach Joe DeGregorio. Many of his former teammates were on hand for the honor bestowed last Tuesday night.

Calipari was a member of the Clarion program when it was ranked in the Top 25 nationally at the Division II level. He also helped the Golden Eagles to their first NCAA Tournament berth in 1981.

Clarion University President Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson unveiled Calipari’s signature on the basketball court that will now be known as Coach Cal Court.

Not only has he supported Clarion with numerous scholarships and even invited the entire Clarion University team to visit Kentucky and play exhibition games with a nationally ranked team, but he has also emboldened his philanthropic efforts with the establishment of the Calipari Foundation.

Addressing thanks to all of his coaches and teammates who helped him along his way in basketball, Calipari was also grateful for the lessons he learned in marketing classes at Clarion.

“Dr. Joe Grunenwald taught me all about branding. I have used it everywhere I have coached,” he said.

Organized in 2012, The Calipari Foundation Inc. (TCF), is a public charity. John and Ellen Calipari formed the foundation to facilitate their involvement in charitable causes throughout Kentucky.

In addition to raising funds to give to nonprofit organizations, TCF hopes to raise the public’s level of awareness regarding philanthropy. Toward that end, one of the goals of the foundation is to encourage members of Kentucky communities — and members of the basketball community — to become involved in and support charitable activity.

A players-first coach with a penchant for helping people reach their dreams, Calipari, a Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Famer, has guided six teams to the Final Four, led one to a national championship, and helped 54 players earn selection in the NBA draft during his 29-year college coaching career.

In advancing to the 2015 Final Four, Calipari became one of just three coaches of all time to make four Final Four appearances in a five-year span, joining Mike Krzyzewski and John Wooden as the other coaches to achieve that feat. Twice at Kentucky in 2012 and in 2015 his teams won 38 games, tying his 2008 Memphis team for the most wins in college basketball history.

At the end of the 2015 season, Calipari became the 96th coach to join the Naismith Memorial basketball Hall of Fame, considered one of the ultimate achievements in the game.

As the Coach Cal Court dedication concluded, the audience of former teammates, coaches, current athletes, trustees, Foundation members and others he met along the way to Kentucky rose for a standing ovation.

They all realized this is a person who made them Clarion Proud.

How losing home in Hurricane Harvey helped mold Kentucky basketball PG Sahvir Wheeler

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal
Sept. 20

Four years later, Sahvir Wheeler still vividly remembers the damage.

After waiting out Hurricane Harvey in College Station Texas, Wheeler, his parents and five younger siblings returned to Houston to find their home destroyed by flooding.

“We lived in the downtown area, so that was bad,” Wheeler said in a one-on-one interview with the Courier Journal. “Water was just crashing, coming in. I remember

going back to the place we were living. Cars were flipped over, trees were down, the basketball courts were completely destroyed.”

It should come as no surprise Wheeler made particular note of the basketball courts.

Basketball was already an essential part of the 5-foot-10 point guard’s life. It would play an even larger role over the next two years as Wheeler elected to finish out his high school career at Houston Christian even after his family relocated to College Station after the storm.

During that period, Houston Christian won back-to-back state championships. Wheeler, who was committed to Texas A&M at the time of the hurricane, eventually signed with Georgia.

As a sophomore at Georgia, Wheeler led the Southeastern Conference in assists. In May, he announced he was transferring to Kentucky.

Lessons learned in the hurricane’s aftermath have proven vital throughout Wheeler’s basketball journey.

“I think it’s one of those things that helped him understand how life is filled with swift transitions, and a lot of this stuff is fleeting,” Sahvir’s father Teddy Wheeler said of the hurricane’s impact on his son. “I think he was able to assess what things were important and what things are not, what things are disposable and what things are eternal. I think it did change him as a young man.”

Wheeler had the option to attend the local high school in College Station after his family relocated, but he felt he had no desire to sever the strong bonds he had already built with the Houston Christian community.

With so much of the family’s life already disrupted, Teddy Wheeler agreed to make the hour-plus trip daily so his oldest son would not have to change schools.

“That community loved him in a way that made him want to inspire me to drive 95 miles a day from door to door, which in hindsight was ridiculous,” Teddy Wheeler said. “We did it because that’s how much his commitment to his school, his community has meant to us, that he could continue to be a part of that. It did shape him, because he built some friendships that were important.”

The Wheelers needed help though.

Houston Christian athletic director Dan Lee launched a GoFundMe that raised more than \$7,000. With late games followed by early morning classes, Wheeler frequently stayed with friends in the city.

Despite being the oldest of six children, Wheeler downplays additional responsibility he took on in the aftermath of the storm to keep his brothers and sisters positive. It

was a group effort, he said.

“The world is not over,” he said. “We were all just like, ‘OK. It’s unfortunate we lost our house, but we know we’re going to bounce back, we’re going to be OK.’ The one thing I can guarantee about our family is we’re going to be OK. No matter what it is, no matter what we’re facing, as long as we’re together, as long as we keep our faith, keep praying, we’re going to be OK, we’re going to get by.”

Instead of focusing on what they had lost, the Wheeler family set incremental goals for each member to make sure they were looking ahead.

For Sahvir, that mindset paid major dividends on the court.

Across his final two seasons at Houston Christian, Wheeler helped the team to a dominant 61-13 record with two South-west Preparatory state titles. The Houston Chronicle named him the Houston Private School MVP as a senior despite him missing the first half of the season with a knee injury. ESPN ranked him as the No. 78 prospect in the country.

“It says something about just his overall character,” Houston Christian coach Ron Crandall said. “That’s just who he is. He’s not going to give in, he’s not going to give up. He’s going to keep pursuing excellence to the highest level. His teammates, they didn’t want to let him down because of the commitment he had made to them. That was what was so cool about that time.”

The lessons Wheeler had learned in dealing with “swift transitions” would be put to the use again in March 2019 when Texas A&M fired coach Billy Kennedy.

The school released Wheeler from his National Letter of Intent. He eventually flipped his commitment to Georgia, where one of his primary recruiters to Texas A&M, assistant coach Amir Abdur-Rahim, had found a new job.

Wheeler broke Georgia’s freshman assists record (139) during his debut season. As a sophomore, he broke the program’s single-season assist record (193) while also leading the Bulldogs in points (14) and steals (1.7) per game, but the isolation forced upon players due to the COVID-19 pandemic made him start to reconsider his future.

Georgia missed the NCAA Tournament in both of Wheeler’s seasons on campus. The odds were already stacked against 5-foot-10 point guards reaching the NBA, but if Wheeler was going to buck that trend, he thought playing for a marquee program with top draft prospects alongside him would be his best opportunity.

At Kentucky, Wheeler will have that chance.

Calipari emphasized adding shooting ability as he worked to rebuild the roster in

the wake of Kentucky's worst season since the Great Depression. Transfers Kellan Grady and C.J. Fredrick and five-star high school signee TyTy Washington joined with returners Davion Mintz and Dontaie Allen to give UK a quintet of elite 3-point shooters in its backcourt.

Wheeler is considered the worst shooter of Kentucky's guards, but he is the team's best passer. With defenses forced to guard his sharp-shooting teammates, Wheeler thinks he will shoot a higher percentage thanks to more open looks.

But he knows his first responsibility is to be the floor general who keeps everyone involved and happy.

That's where being the oldest of six children comes in handy.

"I think it's equipped me to handle people of all walks of life, people of all personalities," Wheeler said. "I think that's the biggest thing: Being able to know what pushes them and when they're down, what brings them up. I think having younger siblings who are kind of prone to those mood swings, or super, super highs or super, super lows, I've kind of learned how to keep everyone even-keeled and keep everyone happy.

"At the end of the day, if your guys are happy, if they want to play with you, if they want to do this because they know they're going to have a chance to shine, that's all you can want as a point guard."

Even if Kentucky immediately bounces back from its 9-16 season to justify a likely preseason top-10 ranking, there will almost certainly be bumps along the road to a deep NCAA Tournament run.

The current Wildcats may not be as young as most of Calipari's Kentucky teams, but the influx of veteran transfers will still need time to learn how to play alongside each other. Finding a system that plays to the roster's strengths and determining the best group of five to play together will be a process as well.

When adversity hits, UK players need only look to the team's diminutive point guard to learn about the value of staying positive.

Four years after Hurricane Harvey destroyed his family's home, Wheeler still carries the experience with him.

"I think the biggest thing is if you can overcome that, you can overcome anything," Wheeler said. "We came out of that experience better. Better as a family, better as a standpoint where everything was upgraded. House was upgraded, cars, clothes.

"The only thing we took was our important documents, pictures, birth certificates, stuff like that. That just showed the amount of resilience that each of us had individually to get through that. ... We just kept each other up and strong, knowing

we're going to come out of it for the better."

How one of the worst seasons in Kentucky basketball history saved Davion Mintz's life

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal Sept. 14

The final chapter in Kentucky basketball's worst season since the Great Depression was still unfinished, but even the most die hard of fans had long since stopped dreaming of an improbable run to an NCAA Tournament bid.

So, when Davion Mintz took to Twitter shortly after a Feb. 27 loss to Florida, before which he had participated in Senior Day festivities despite not yet deciding whether he would use the extra year of eligibility granted all players during the COVID-19 pandemic, he knew he had to send a message in case he was entering his final weeks as a Wildcat.

"Regardless of the outcome I cannot thank Big Blue Nation enough for the support and love I felt tonight and all season," the former Creighton transfer tweeted. "Kentucky saved my life, helping me grow as a person and player, but most importantly letting me be the real me."

Three games and two losses later, Mintz's first season at Kentucky would end with an anticlimactic 74-73 loss to Mississippi State in the team's opening game at the SEC Tournament. Two months later, Mintz would officially place his name in the NBA draft pool while leaving the door open to a possible return to UK.

While Mintz was testing the draft waters, searching to find a team that might consider drafting him in the second round, Kentucky coach John Calipari was busy remaking the Wildcat roster and coaching staff to ensure there would be no repeat of the 9-16 season.

But the Hall of Fame coach made it clear a spot was left for Mintz if he wanted to return to school.

On July 1, Mintz removed his name from the draft pool. Now almost seven months after his thank you tweet to the Big Blue Nation, Mintz is more confident than ever that despite the losing record and COVID-19 restrictions, his first season as a Wildcat forever changed him.

"Just being at Creighton, it was a great experience for me, but it was nothing like what I'm going through now," Mintz said in a one-on-one interview with the Courier Journal. "Just being embraced and being somewhere that fits my identity, Kentucky was just a perfect match for me. Being able to be challenged and grow into the person I want to be, especially on the court but more importantly off the court learning

how to deal with things and mature. If feel like my year at Kentucky, it fit for literally four years of college.

"I felt like I matured more in this one year last year than I did for four years. Just the community, the way they embrace it and the things Coach Cal and the coaching staff have helped and done for me, it really saved my life and put me in a different position that I'm extremely grateful for. Most people can't say they joined a fraternity, a brotherhood like this one. It's really La Familia. It's a family here."

How Davion Mintz embraced Kentucky basketball

Kentucky guard Davion Mintz laughs after missing a shot at the buzzer to end the first half of an NCAA college basketball game between Kentucky and Vanderbilt Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP Photo/Mark Humphrey) Mintz's play was one of the few bright spots in Kentucky's embarrassing season.

Recruited as a likely six man capable of filling in at any spot in the backcourt, Mintz ended up leading the Wildcats in scoring. He hit go-ahead 3s in the final minute of two of Kentucky's nine wins. When Calipari moved Mintz to point guard for the final three games of the season, he responded by averaging 15.3 points with 23 assists and three turnovers.

But Mintz's breakout performance came with Rupp Arena capacity limited to just 15% and players locked down from interacting with fans out of fear of contracting the coronavirus.

With his younger siblings spending much of the year in online school, at least one of Mintz's parents was able to attend every home game and most of the road games. Other than a brief hello after the SEC Tournament loss, his parents never met Calipari face to face until a visit to Lexington earlier this summer.

"Davion was one of the most appreciative young people I've been around," Calipari said. "He made statements to me about this program. He'd look at me and say, 'You saved my life.'"

"What are you talking about? 'Coach, you gave me a chance. You breathed life into me again so I could do what I love doing.'"

That renewed passion for the game was apparent to Mintz's family as they made the trip back and forth between Charlotte, North Carolina and Lexington.

An ankle injury had caused Mintz to miss his entire senior season at Creighton. As he watched from the sideline, his teammates won a Big East championship.

Even though the Bluejays were projected to enter the 2020-21 season as a top-25 team, Mintz felt like he needed a change.

He placed his name in the transfer portal, hoping a marquee program might show some interest in a player who had started all but one game of his last two healthy seasons.

"Him being down, not knowing what his next steps were -- whatever he was trying to accomplish in the future, is this going to happen, is this not going to happen? -- to get that phone call, I think Kentucky really did kind of put that fun back into his game, that excitement back into his game," Mintz's mother, Sandy, told the Courier Journal. "Putting on that Kentucky uniform, nothing can beat that."

By the time Mintz committed to Kentucky, the COVID-19 pandemic had already shut down the sports world, but there was still hope the restrictions would only last weeks instead of more than a year.

Mintz arrived on campus to a lockdown that prevented him interacting closely with his new teammates on the practice court or in the dorm. The season was eventually delayed. Instead of being welcomed to Kentucky by more than 20,000 screaming fans at Big Blue Madness, Mintz participated in a pre-packaged made-for-television event recorded with no fans in the Memorial Coliseum stands.

Preseason exhibitions were canceled, as were many of the fall semester games against low-major opponents Calipari's young Kentucky teams use to find their early footing. When Mintz finally did get to play for Kentucky, he did so in front of just more than 3,000 fans spread out in the cavernous 20,000-seat Rupp Arena.

A season-opening blowout of Morehead State proved to be fool's gold as Kentucky lost each of its next six games. A three-game winning streak in early January offered hope for a turnaround, but the 4-6 record on Jan. 9 proved to be the high-water mark in SEC play as the Wildcats dropped seven of their next eight games to end any hopes of rallying for an at-large NCAA Tournament bid. Meanwhile, a vocal portion of the Kentucky fan base took to social media to voice its displeasure about the team's decision to kneel during the national anthem as a protest against racial inequality before the Florida game.

The March 11 loss to Mississippi State in Nashville officially ended a season that had long been dead in the water.

Frustration showed for Mintz at times as he was often chosen to speak for the team in postgame Zoom news conferences as the losses mounted, but behind the scenes he was doing everything he could to soak up what little of a "normal" Kentucky experience was available.

"You never know who you meet outside of just walking down the street or social media guys, fans," Mintz said. "People re-

ally care and want to see you succeed. Me just being humble and still knowing that although it's a tough year, I've got to stay focused, stay dedicated, be in the gym and handle what I have to do. Just try to bring others along with me.

"It was a tough year, but just being mature, understanding that it can't rain forever, and the sun has to come out eventually to dry everything up. That's just kind of the approach I took with it."

Why Davion Mintz returned to Kentucky for another season

In his heart, Mintz believes he is an NBA player.

The same competitive drive his mother has noticed since Mintz was a young child led him to test the draft waters. Many expected Mintz to sign a professional contract overseas or try to work his way through the G League instead of coming back to school, but Mintz had no interest in following a predictable script.

"He kept saying I have a job to finish, I owe the fans," Sandy Mintz said. "All he talked about was the fans: 'I owe it to my fans.' People were tweeting things, reaching out to him. ... I know he was kind of torn just a little bit, but he did feel like he had some unfinished business as well at UK."

There were basketball reasons for Mintz to return.

He felt his potential was unlocked by Calipari's system and hoped another impressive season for a winning Kentucky team would prove to NBA scouts he was a late bloomer, not a product of a bad team needing someone to score.

But Mintz knew the roster he would return to was far deeper than the one he left.

Kentucky added transfer guards Kellan Grady, Sahvir Wheeler and C.J. Fredrick along with five-star point guard recruit TyTy Washington. With Dontae Allen, Keion Brooks and Jacob Toppin also back to compete for minutes on the wing, there was no guarantee Mintz would even start during his "super senior" season.

"I didn't know kind of how things would mesh until I kind of got back in the summer," Mintz said. "I saw the attitudes of the guys and I saw the demeanor that everyone carried. They kind of welcomed me back in an area: You belong here, we have a space for you. Not from the coaching staff, the team. It starts within the team, how they embrace you."

Of course, the better roster increases the chances Mintz gets to experience what playing for a winning Kentucky team actually feels like.

As of now, UK is planning to play in front of a full-capacity Rupp Arena, but with

COVID-19 cases soaring again, Mintz knows his final college season might still not be normal.

It's close enough though to begin dreaming of what it would feel like to duplicate his game-winning 3 against Vanderbilt in front of a capacity crowd. If somehow his penchant for hitting clutch shots carried over to a deep NCAA Tournament run, Mintz knows the experience would be unlike anything else in his career.

Since Mintz did not play during his last season at Creighton, it will have been more than two years since his last game in front of a packed arena when Kentucky opens its season against Duke in the Champions Classic on Nov. 9.

Mintz may have already gotten more than he could have ever hoped for out of playing for Kentucky, but the dream of even more grows by the day. If Mintz could be embraced by Kentucky so easily during the worst season in the modern era of the program, imagine how beloved he might become as a key piece on the squad that returned the program to its normal spot atop the college basketball world.

More than anything, Mintz wants to make sure he repays Kentucky for what the program has already given him.

"I get it's cliché or whatever, but deep down in my heart I didn't want to leave this university like this," Mintz said. "The respect that I have and the legacy, it really means a lot. I'm not even from Kentucky. I wasn't a Kentucky fan growing up, but I was a blue-blood basketball fan."

"The respect I have for this school and this program and the players that came and paved the way before me, I couldn't leave on the type of year that we had. I want to leave something special."

UMass unveils statues of basketball icons John Calipari, Marcus Camby, Julius Erving and Jack Leaman

By Matt Vautor | MassLive.com | Sept. 10

AMHERST — Standing on one end of the floor of the Champions Center, the UMass basketball program's still shiny practice facility John Calipari was distracted from his media interviews for a second by loud laughter nearby.

He paused and looked over. The noise came Tyrone Weeks and Donta Bright sitting on a bench nearby. It's been 25 years since Weeks and Bright were teammates on UMass' 1995-96 Final Four team. But together again, they fell into old patterns, joking, telling old stories and laughing. Calipari smiled. All these years later, his guys were still his guys.

Officially Friday's event was the unveiling of statues outside the Mullins Center

of four of the most important figures in UMass men's basketball history - Calipari, Marcus Camby Julius Erving and Jack Leaman. Later that night Camby and Calipari and the rest of the 1995-96 team were scheduled to be honored as part of the UMass' Hall of Fame enshrinement ceremony.

Unofficially it was a kind of a family reunion as the players, assistant coaches and even many of the student managers returned to campus.

"Every time I get a chance to come back to the area, it brings back nostalgia for me," said Camby, who was already planning an Antonio's Pizza visit. "I'm happy all my brothers are here this time around. It's fun."

Calipari's papa bear pride at seeing them be honored together eclipsed the ego boost of seeing himself immortalized in bronze.

"The '96 team being inducted is more important to me," said Calipari, who then self-deprecatingly praised the sculpture's authenticity. "The statue had a big nose so... (motioning toward his own nose)."

Calipari hoped Matt McCall's current men's team and Tory Verdi's women's squad who were both sitting up front at the statue ceremony would see the cohesion that Final Four team's players, who are all in their mid-to-late 40s now, still have.

"I'd like the players that are here and the women's team to see the camaraderie of the team from 1995-96. That's why you become good. Because you're close and do things together," Calipari said. "Coming together, creating relationships, being authentic, being there for each other. Picking each other up. If they do that they'll win and they'll have a lasting legacy. Their teammates today will be their teammates 40 years from now."

On top of finding those friendships, Erving and Camby talked about what being in college meant to their off-court development as adults. At a time where some American players go overseas to play professionally or to the G-League instead of college, both Erving and Camby advocated the value of the college experience.

"It forced me to grow up at a young age. I think that this was my foundation for everything I've been doing since I came here," said Camby, whose oldest daughter is starting college this year. "More of it is from the social aspect of it. I can't even imagine being a high school kid thrust into the NBA spotlight with teammates who are 30-35 who have kids and have families. College life is the best life. I wish I could have did a senior year here and gone out with Carmelo (Travieso), Edgar (Padilla) and Ty, who were in my class."

Erving turned pro after his junior season

signing with the ABA's Virginia Squires. He said it was the right decision at the time, but decades later he wonders what his senior year would have been like.

"If I had to do it again, I would have stayed in school another year," he said. "Every moment before I turned professional, I only thought of getting my degree in business administration and being a student. I was a student right up until I signed the contract."

Detroit Mercy's Davis sees 'ton of success' ahead for Brad Calipari in coaching

By Jerry Tipton | Lexington Herald-Leader Aug. 26

A sentence with the words Kentucky, basketball, coach and Calipari will need clarification going forward. UK announced Thursday that Brad Calipari is joining his father's staff as a graduate assistant coach.

Of course, he was on three Kentucky teams coached by his father, John Calipari, before completing his college eligibility for Detroit Mercy.

As speculation of a return to Kentucky circulated earlier this year, Detroit Mercy Coach Mike Davis said that the younger Calipari's second turn with the UK program might not be long lasting.

"I don't know how long he'll be at Kentucky because I'm telling you, he'll be a head coach before long (thoughtful pause) with a lot of success," Davis said before correcting himself. "A ton of success."

Added Davis: "I would definitely consider hiring him if I had a spot."

Brad Calipari became something of an assistant coach without the title for Detroit Mercy last season. More talented teammates limited him to playing in only six games. That led to a meeting with Davis, who advised him to use the time to prepare for coaching in the future.

The player/coach helped prepare film, work on game plans and direct workouts for teammates.

"He respected my knowledge of the game, listened to me and my input . . ." Brad Calipari said of Davis in a story Detroit Mercy prepared for its Senior Day ceremony. "I am seeing everything from a different perspective, and it's almost like a different love for the game."

In its news release, UK said that Brad Calipari's duties will include on-court input in practices and individual workouts, plus contributing to practice plans and scouting opponents.

Brad Calipari graduated in three years from UK in 2019 with a degree in Communications. While at Detroit Mercy, he received a Master's degree in liberal studies this spring. As a graduate assistant, he

will pursue a Master's in Kinesiology.

Davis was taken aback by how well Calipari shifted his focus from wanting to continue playing in the future to setting his sights on coaching.

"His feel for the game is way ahead of his age," Davis said of Calipari, who will turn 25 on Nov. 11. "It's kind of like you see singers who may be young. When you hear them sing, you say, 'Wow. That's a beautiful voice.'"

"He's got that 'it.'"

In the story for Detroit Mercy's Senior Day, Calipari said he has always wanted to be a coach. That ambition took the highest priority early in the 2020-21 season.

Of course, Calipari grew up in the basketball world. He was born in New Jersey when his father was the Nets' coach. His advanced learning experience included watching his father's Memphis team play in the 2008 national championship game as an 11-year-old.

Calipari's high school playing career began at Lexington Christian Academy. After three seasons as a walk-on at Kentucky, Calipari transferred to Detroit Mercy. In 2019-20, he made 38 percent of his three-point shots (46 of 121) and averaged 6.1 points and 20.2 minutes.

In the story for Detroit Mercy's Senior Day, Calipari said his two seasons at the school had helped him grow as a player and aspiring coach.

Calipari recalled his father helping him understand that coaching was "a hard profession." Creating good relationships was key. And it was best to coach with the intent of helping others achieve their goals. The latter includes lifting players and their families out of poverty.

"I have seen that from such a young age, and (it's) something I want to continue to do," Brad Calipari said in the Detroit Mercy story.

In his son, John Calipari saw himself circa the early 1980s.

"He is doing what I did, and that is dreaming big dreams and having his thoughts about what it would be like if he was a head coach," the UK coach said. ". . . Coaching is about the long haul. It is about getting an opportunity to be on a staff and getting an opportunity to get a job. At the end of the day, if you care about kids, if you create relationships with people that are long-lasting relationships, his commitment to himself, to the sport, to training his body, shift that to coaching and he will have a long career."

Davis told the younger Calipari to set high goals.

"It's kind of crazy," the Detroit Mercy coach said. "I told him, you're going to be way better than your dad. Your dad is a Hall of Famer. I'm not taking anything away

from your dad. Your dad is unbelievable. Hall of Fame speaks for itself.

“But I said, man, you’re going to be really, really good.”

Meet TJ Beisner, Kentucky new player development director who bet big on himself and won

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Aug. 17

Ten years ago this month, T.J. Beisner bet on himself. Well, sort of. His wife, Monique, bet on him, which he feared was crazy and sure to plunge their family into financial ruin. Nevertheless, at her prodding, he quit his job selling printers and scanners in Seminole, Fla., sold his beat-up Oldsmobile Bravada to cover moving expenses and drove to Louisville to begin a part-time job producing Kentucky Sports Television, a half-hour show on local cable. In no time, he was interviewing a Hall of Fame basketball writer while wearing a Buzz Lightyear costume.

“Isn’t that stupid?” Beisner says now, laughing at himself. He’s good at that. “We kept our house in Florida and rented it out, just in case we needed a fallback plan. She knew that I wanted to use my journalism degree and really pushed me to give it a shot, but we both agreed to pull the plug if it wasn’t working after 12 months.”

Nine months in, it was not working. The money just didn’t add up. The Beisners didn’t tell anybody, but they had already decided to bail on the grand experiment and regroup back in Florida. Hey, at least they tried. Then KSTV’s popular host, Matt Jones, whose website also employed Beisner as a blogger and editor, abruptly left the show. Beisner didn’t know it yet, but that changed the entire trajectory of his life and career. Management asked him to take over as host.

“Now, the thought of being on TV made me want to vomit,” Beisner says. “I had avoided all the broadcast classes in college because I was very shy and had a lot of social anxiety most of my life. I spent years hiding from people. But they said, ‘You’ll be a full-time employee and we’ll give you a raise.’ Oh. Well then, yes.”

A decade later, someone else is betting on Beisner. This time, he can afford to keep both the family cars. John Calipari last week tapped the 38-year-old UK alumnus for a newly created position on the basketball staff: director of player development. That title encompasses a number of responsibilities that will shape players’ off-court experiences, but none will be more important than Beisner’s role in helping the program navigate college basketball’s new name, image and likeness era. After six years on television and the last three years working as a creative go-between for

UK Athletics and its media-rights partner, JMI Sports, Beisner is reinventing himself again.

Not long ago, he had a TV gimmick called “Cal or Kanye?” Now he works for one of them.

“That this is happening doesn’t even process. It’s so cool,” Beisner says. “Monique and I went to dinner to celebrate, and every few minutes, I’d just look at her and go, ‘Oh my gosh.’ And she’d be like, ‘It’s weird, right?’ And I’m like, ‘It’s so weird.’ But I don’t feel any pressure, because I’m excited about this. I genuinely believe we’re about to enter another big-time chapter at Kentucky. We’re going to succeed, so I don’t feel pressure. I do feel a sense of responsibility, because John Calipari and his staff all signed off on this, they said they believe in me, and I don’t want to prove them wrong. I want to make good on their faith in me.”

So what exactly is this job?

Calipari described it to Beisner thusly: Anything outside those white lines for the players, you have a hand in it. Three letters (NIL) have defined this summer in college athletics, but Calipari is more broadly focused on two words. “Player welfare” is his new catch-all catch phrase. That means Beisner will spearhead community service projects, fan engagement opportunities, NIL education for players and their parents, brand-building to increase marketability and whatever else emerges on this new frontier where college athletes can profit off their fame.

“This position is going to play a major role in the next phase of Kentucky basketball,” Calipari said upon announcing Beisner’s job. “Kentucky should be the best in the country in branding, player welfare and development.”

Beisner, who earned Calipari’s trust and respect as an idea guy while running CoachCal.com and creating social media content for him, is now tasked with executing a somewhat nebulous vision. The truth is, no one knows yet exactly what is possible (or will ultimately be allowed by the NCAA) in this new era. What looks like a winning NIL plan today is sure to evolve — critics might say mutate — and probably will do so in a hurry. For now, the key is to have dedicated staff members monitoring every development and thinking outside the box about how a program might set itself apart in that space.

“It’s extremely important because these are questions that families and kids are asking in the recruiting process,” Beisner says. “This stuff matters to them now, but these are not situations they necessarily want to manage themselves. They just want to play basketball. They come to Kentucky because there’s a whole wall of guys

who’ve come before them and gone on to the NBA. That part hasn’t changed. This new avenue is just another chance for us to show why Kentucky is the best place to play in college. The opportunity I have now is to sit down with players and say, ‘This is what (NIL) looks like, and this is how you navigate it and these are the resources we have in place and this is why that’s better than any place in the country.’ I can say to moms and dads, ‘I am the person who will take your phone call 100 percent of the time when you have a question.’”

When parents call with a NIL opportunity that has presented itself and wants to know whether it’s allowed, whether it’s a good idea, how to dot their i’s and cross their t’s with compliance, Beisner will have (or find out) those answers.

“I’m going to be the person who puts your mind at ease that your son is taken care of in this important area,” he says. “You can be sure that his paperwork is squared away and we’ve talked to him and understand his goals and can help him get there. We want to help these guys establish: Who am I? What do I want to be known for when I’m 30 years old? OK, now let’s get you on that path.”

Beisner will help create personalized plans for each player to tell their own unique story through social media, traditional media and real-life public interactions. “Branding” is the buzzword of the day, he says, but “engagement” is really the name of the game.

“That’s what we’re teaching them: how to engage with our fans, but also with organizations they believe in, their hometowns, their campus community, the business community, whatever communities exist around their interests,” Beisner says.

“You’re into music? OK, let’s engage you with some musicians or media who cater to that interest. Let’s go out and serve the community so they understand you’re a three-dimensional person who cares about the power of your platform. Let’s take a strategic approach to creating an environment that engages Kentucky basketball players in all the communities they impact.”

“A lot of people assume we’re now recruiting against the G League or other pro options, but that’s not the point at all. We believe the kids who ultimately come here are doing so because they wanted that college experience, and we want to make sure they’re getting everything they possibly can out of it.”

Buzz Lightyear sounds all grown up, doesn’t he? His own son, Tyler, is a senior walk-on wide receiver for the Kentucky football team. His alma mater is even letting him teach a communication class this fall, a fact not even Beisner can believe. He’s come a long way since his days as the

creator of silly TV gags like “UK on eBay” and “The Dominique Hawkins Smile Test” and conducting interviews using only nonsensical Doron Lamb tweets — which is to say, Doron Lamb tweets.

His greatest achievement came during the 2017 postseason, when Kentucky guard Isaiah Briscoe was fed up with speaking to the media and became wholly uncooperative in interviews. Beisner came up with a running bit that always elicited a funny response (and giggles) from Briscoe: “One question with Zay.” The deal was that Beisner would only ask one question, not about basketball, in each of his remaining media availabilities. If Briscoe tried earnestly to answer that one question, he would be left alone. The series concluded with Beisner asking what advice the former McDonald’s All-American would give a newborn baby. Between convulsions of laughter, Briscoe held up his end of the bargain.

“Well, one, you can’t give a baby advice,” he said, attempting to keep a straight face. “Because he’s, you know — come on, you can’t give a baby advice.”

To quote Beisner: Isn’t that stupid? No, actually, it was brilliant. Reporters covering Kentucky basketball don’t get many chances or much time to connect with the players, most of whom are only around for a year or two. Beisner was better than anyone in local media at finding creative ways to connect quickly. That ability to disarm star athletes will serve him well in this new role.

“We put them on a pedestal and forget that they’re teenagers,” Beisner says. “Some of them get really nervous in that situation or they’re feeling the pressure of being at Kentucky and they just clam up. Maybe it was the dad in me, but I found myself wanting to just make them laugh and relax a little bit. It probably helped that I wasn’t this classic TV guy, and I was taking over for someone who was really popular, so I knew viewers were probably asking, ‘Who is this guy?’ The safe bet was that I was going to fail spectacularly, so I decided I would rather fail being myself than trying to be some serious news anchor.”

Because of that approach, former players still remember Beisner. They called and texted when he got this new job, in numbers that surprised him, but many of them were just returning the favor. Beisner stayed up late throughout the Olympics watching three Wildcats win gold with Team USA. Keldon Johnson, an effervescent 21-year-old and the unexpected star of Beisner’s 2019 all-access series with walk-on Jonny David, is one of his favorites. While Johnson sprayed champagne in the winning locker room, Beisner texted him congratulations from across the world.

“I’m watching him celebrate on TV,” Beisner says, “and he texts back! Minutes after winning a gold medal! That was just another surreal moment in this thing. Keldon has real family and real friends, but I got to know what kind of person he was while he was here and so I was genuinely happy for him. That’s what I hope I’m bringing to this job. I have the joy and excitement about this program that a lot of these fans have, and I want to be the person who is constantly conveying that to our players. I hope I can be part of their college experience in a way that helps them feel connected to this community — and helps the community feel connected to them.”

With this unconventional hire, Kentucky is betting on it.

Inside the summer workouts that Kentucky hopes will lead to a bounce-back season

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | Aug. 2

After putting Kentucky basketball players through eight weeks of grueling summer workouts, strength and conditioning coach Rob Harris thought he had identified the team’s emotional leaders. Juniors Keion Brooks and Jacob Toppin, to no one’s great surprise as returning contributors, set the tone almost every day. There was a palpable “never again” energy about the way they worked in the aftermath of a historically bad year for the program. But then late one night last week at Kroger Field, Harris sprung his final test of the offseason, and another leader emerged. As he broke down their bodies to challenge their minds, provoking a fight-or-flight dilemma that demanded a response, Harris loved what he saw.

They’d already run the football stadium’s stairs until their lungs and legs burned. They’d already performed farmer’s walks with heavy dumbbells until their forearms and hamstrings cramped. That was just the warm-up. Then Harris ordered them to bear crawl the length of the field — and back. He wanted the weary Wildcats to cover 200 yards of steamy turf on just the palms of their hands and tips of their toes, kicking up rubber pellets into sweat-soaked faces with every stride. It wasn’t so much a physical evaluation, because collapse was inevitable, as it was an assessment of their mental capacity to get back up and keep going. Turns out, the exercise can reveal even more than that.

Davidson transfer Kellan Grady was among the first to finish, but then he did something that really got everyone’s attention. He returned to the field and assumed the position alongside teammates who were struggling to get through it. He barked out words of affirmation as he bear-

crawled the final yards with them.

“I saw a side of Kellan that I had never seen before; he became that encourager, that voice that reminds the guys we can do this,” Harris says. “And that’s a contagious attitude. Next thing you know, everybody else started to finish their crawl and then go help their teammates finish too. You look around and realize it has turned into something a lot more powerful than just, ‘I can complete this workout.’ It turned into pulling your brother through with you, and everybody just kind of coming together for the first time to be one unit. It was actually really dope to see.”

That moment also crystalized for Harris exactly what the Wildcats missed last summer, when COVID-19 restrictions disrupted everything about their normal offseason schedule. They got a late start, could not condition together as a team, could not share meals or socialize together between workouts, and every time a player so much as had contact with an infected person, he was held out of training for 10 days. “So many hiccups,” Harris says. He doesn’t want to use that as an excuse for Kentucky’s stunning 1-6 start and abysmal 9-16 finish — every program in college basketball faced similar challenges, after all — but having nine new players, six of them freshmen, compounded the problem. How do you build a team when most of your preparation is done in isolation?

“It sucked, honestly. It was terrible. It was a big struggle,” Harris says. “Team meals are an integral part of the program in the summer. It allows me to get them together and let them know how important eating is, but it also allows them to sit down and eat together and be a family. I’m a big believer in the idea that families who eat together are stronger than families who go their separate ways when they get home. And that’s what Kentucky basketball has always been about: being a family. You just don’t get that when B.J. Boston has to go to his room and eat alone and only sees Keion Brooks for five minutes passing through the hallways.”

While there are plenty of new pieces again — four transfers and three freshmen — there are also five returning scholarship players who logged real minutes last season. Brooks, Toppin, Davion Mintz, Dontaie Allen and Lance Ware are back and hoping for a much more typical Kentucky basketball experience this time around. Two months in, having completed a normal strength and conditioning program and a series of youth basketball camps where they mingled with fans around the state, all signs point to a bounce back.

“The fun and joy and excitement of being back together with your brothers is a big difference, man,” Harris says. “People

don't realize how much the mental part matters. It's been so much more fun for those guys, and that fun environment has allowed them to push harder when things get tough. It's allowed them to kind of enjoy the grind more, as opposed to feeling like you're in jail. Last year, that's kind of what it felt like to our guys, just literally being in jail. You got your time when you can come out and work out, then you're back in your room for dang near 23 hours a day. So that's the biggest change this year, that guys are loving the process. Keion, Jacob, Davion, Dontaie, Lance, they're all hella stronger because they attacked it differently, because their mindset is different. We've seen so much more progress with those guys than we saw last summer."

It also helps that John Calipari's 13th team at Kentucky will be his oldest and most experienced yet. With the additions of Grady and fellow transfers Sahvir Wheeler (Georgia), C.J. Fredrick (Iowa) and Oscar Tshiebwe (West Virginia), nine Cats have significant college experience, and seven of them have played 40-plus games, logged 800-plus minutes and scored 20-plus points in a Division I basketball game. In a program known for leaning heavily on freshmen, that has been a refreshing change. Harris didn't spend much time babysitting this summer.

In fact, he says, the players often picked him up during workouts.

"Especially those returning guys, because they're so motivated to not go through what they went through last year again," Harris says. "If workout time is 9 o'clock, guys are showing up at 8:43 ready to go. It's a really different vibe, and it rubs off on everybody. Normally, with freshmen it's, 'OK, I gotta be there at 9? I'm walking in the building at 8:55 and walking in the weight room at 8:59 and 59 seconds.' But we have so many veterans now that if it's 8:55 and somebody is not in the weight room, those leaders are getting on the phone like, 'Yo, where you at?' It makes my job so much easier."

Now, about that job. Harris, who worked previously on football strength and conditioning staffs at Kentucky, Arkansas, Ohio State and the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals, is entering his eighth year with UK basketball. He knows elite athletes when he sees them. So what does he think of this group?

Let's start with the most physically imposing player. Tshiebwe was listed at 6-foot-9 and 260 pounds last season but looks considerably trimmer with protruding abdominal muscles and chiseled arms in photos of the football-field workout last week. The best offensive rebounder in America as a freshman at West Virginia, he seems to be an answer to Kentucky's

problem of getting bullied in the paint last season.

"Oscar is so much of a freak," Harris says. "Everybody is always asking me, 'How strong is Oscar?' I'm like, 'Look, Oscar is strong, but I'm not about to have him in here lifting the entire weight room.' We're going to work on the things that Oscar needs. Like Nick Richards used to get mad at me all the time for never letting him bench 315. I'm like, 'Nick, you just benched 265 five times. I know you can do 315. I don't need to see it.' My thing is: What are your needs? If you can bench 315, but your core is terrible and you have terrible hips, then what? We're not having a benching contest against the other team, right?"

"But when you ask me how much of a grown man Oscar is, I'll put it to you this way: No matter what you throw at him, no matter what position he's in, no matter how hard stuff is, he finds a way to fight through. He uses every single day to get better. He knows he's strong as an ox but has other areas he needs improvement, so he attacks those every single day. He has that work ethic of a guy who thinks, 'I cannot fail.' So he loves the work, and he sees it helping him. He came to me a couple days ago and said how much better he felt himself moving. That's the joy in this for me."

On the other end of the spectrum, physically, is freshman forward Daimion Collins, a 6-9 string bean who was generously listed at 210 pounds as a senior in high school. It would surprise no one if he was under two bills. A super-bouncy kid with extra-long broomsticks for arms, Collins never really lifted seriously while growing up in a tiny Texas town where he could dominate the competition with his freakish natural gifts alone.

"He's actually responded very well to it. He doesn't quit," Harris says. "He may not be able to physically do something, but mentally he's not going to give up. For a guy like that, the main thing I'm going to do for him — me and our nutritionist, Monica Fowler — is make sure that kid understands how important fueling your body is and how important eating is going to be for a cat like him. He's going to be on a different plan than a lot of these older guys. We have to teach him to love the weight room and create an environment where that's possible. I have to establish a relationship with him and make this fun and teach him the basics of strength and conditioning: a lot of volume, a lot of reps, a lot of light weights to start off."

And a lot of calories. Collins has been shoveling in at least 5,000 calories a day all summer. A normal fit person would consume between 1,500 and 2,000 calories on average. He's already gained about 15

pounds.

"People don't realize how hard it is to eat 5,000 calories," he says. "That's like exercise. You have to push yourself to handle all that food. You've got to give him credit for sticking with that plan."

Asked to identify the returning player who has made the biggest leap, Harris is torn between Brooks and Toppin. After some hemming and hawing, he settles on Toppin, the 6-9 younger brother of former national player of the year Obi Toppin, a famously late bloomer. His reasoning: If Brooks hadn't suffered a calf injury that cost him all of preseason practice and the first nine games last season, "I don't really think he's here this year." In other words, Brooks actually made the jump a year ago but never really got to show it.

"I think he can be that P.J. Washington Year 2 type of player," Harris says. "But Jacob from last year to now, you're looking at night and day. Skill-wise, he looks so much more confident on the court. And in the weight room, he never really was used to lifting heavy weights and actually feeling strong. Last year, we'd do certain things, and he would look over at me like, 'Man, I can't.' Now he's telling me, 'Give me more.' Now I'm trying to pull him back so he doesn't do too much. Attitude-wise, weight-wise, strength-wise, skill-wise, he's probably made the biggest leap."

"From an athleticism standpoint, (freshman) Bryce Hopkins has really, really surprised me," Harris says. "He can give you some of that Alex Poythress-type strength and athleticism, but I think Bryce can maybe be a little more skilled. And Sahvir is one of a kind. He's very, very special as that floor general. He's so fast and quick. I compare him to Tyler Ulis. And (freshman) TyTy Washington is someone who surprised me from a weight room standpoint. He kind of reminds me of Ashton Hagans in terms of how strong he is and how strong I think he's going to be. Ashton is a good standard for TyTy as far as having that defensive mindset and very similar body types. By the time the season starts, TyTy will be around the same weight Ashton played at here, and maybe a little bigger. He's a beast."

Harris is already handing out nicknames, too. Like "Grandpa" for Grady, who turns 24 in September.

"I'm always reminding him: This ain't Davidson no more!" Harris says. "That's just my joke, and it's not a knock on any other program, but I just know how Kentucky basketball is. Cal has made this a one-of-a-kind place. The new guys from other schools, CJ and Sahvir, they say no place in the country works like we do. And I think even for the guys who were here with us last year, they're learning that.

They were here, but they weren't really here. I told those guys in March, 'Be ready, because this summer you're going to experience a true Kentucky basketball summer.' But the cool thing to see, with all these older guys now, is they're all picking each other up and helping each other through it. You have those voices in workouts, in practice, in the locker room saying, 'We can do this if we stick together.' It's like nobody is being left behind."

How Kentucky basketball positioned itself to be a leader in the new world of NIL

By Ben Roberts | Lexington Herald-Leader Aug. 2

Just 34 minutes after the clock struck midnight on July 1 — ushering the college sports world into a new and unpredictable era — one of the University of Kentucky's most beloved athletes tweeted out a message to his tens of thousands of followers.

"Excited to team up with @theplayerstrunk to come out with my own custom merch. Stay tuned throughout the year for more!!!"

The tweet came from Dontaie Allen — a fan favorite on the UK men's basketball team — and it featured a graphic with shirts bearing the likeness of the Wildcats guard, decked out in a blue uniform, wearing his familiar No. 11, with his name emblazoned across the front.

Allen, who posted the same message on his Instagram account, directed his social media following to a link to a specialized page on the online apparel company The Players Trunk's website. There, fans could buy a T-shirt for \$29.99, a sweatshirt for \$59.99.

After years of debate, anticipation and hand wringing, the name, image and likeness era in college athletics had arrived.

Allen's deal with The Players Trunk was the first announced by a UK men's basketball player, and among the first revealed by any player nationwide.

"They hit me up and talked to me about some things — about how they wanted to get my shirts out there, get my merch out there," he told the Herald-Leader. "I thought the deal was good, and I wanted my fans and the people who support me to be able to wear some things of me.

"I felt like the deal made sense. And I went from there."

In the past, of course, this sort of dealmaking between athletes and business entities would have been against the NCAA's amateurism rules. Such financial agreements would have rendered Allen ineligible to play college basketball.

The reforms to those NCAA rules this summer — following years of public pres-

sure and, finally, state legislation and the threat of federal intervention — made it possible for players to profit off their name, image and likeness and retain their eligibility to compete in college sports.

For Allen, the T-shirt deal came together relatively quickly.

The seeds of the idea were planted well ahead of time.

PREPARING KENTUCKY BASKETBALL

On June 10, exactly three weeks before the NIL era was unleashed on college sports, the UK men's basketball team was nearing the end of a statewide tour of youth basketball camps that had the Wildcats criss-crossing the commonwealth.

The trips — this was the eighth in 10 days — had surely grown monotonous, but this one was a little bit different. Instead of a bus ride, the players boarded a train that took them from Lexington to Simpsonville, catching a bus there that took them to that day's camp at North Oldham High School.

On the roundtrip train ride, there were team-bonding opportunities — a big focus this summer on a squad with yet another large group of newcomers — and there was also a presentation.

That presentation, led by the team's sports information director, Eric Lindsey, focused on how UK's players could build their brands through social media. It outlined the opportunities they could have as Kentucky basketball players, and it included ways the staff could help them reach their goals.

This talk wasn't exactly new — Lindsey said it's been given to the team for the past several years — but, with the NIL era fast approaching, this iteration was certainly different.

"From a 30,000-foot view of what we talked about — it's how to be prepared for the moment," he said. "How to brand yourself. How to do social media right. And the opportunity that they have at Kentucky — where, in our opinion, there's no bigger stage, there's no broader spotlight. We just talked about to them — first of all, how we can help them."

The presentation, which also included input from UK's Deb Moore and TJ Beisner, clearly resonated. The players were locked in, and — once the team officials were done talking — there were further questions from several Cats.

After the talk, Lindsey said he went to the front of the train, sat down for lunch, and checked his phone. There, he saw that some of the Kentucky players had already started creating new social media accounts and publicizing existing ones.

Allen was one of them, taking to Twitter to point followers to his Instagram account while also creating a Facebook fan page.

"It was literally right after the meeting," he acknowledged.

One of his takeaways from that presentation was, basically, to show Kentucky fans his true self. Many UK fans had already closely followed Allen's career — from in-state star at Pendleton County High School to Kentucky Mr. Basketball to a key part of the Wildcats' team this past season — but that was all on-the-court stuff.

"If you have certain interests — if you're into fashion, if you're into gaming, into watching movies, just different stuff, off-the-court wise — they said you should definitely market yourself for that," Allen said. "And it would be good for you to show BBN that, show all your fans that."

Allen, who is going into his third year as a Kentucky Wildcat, confirmed that the team had sat through similar talks in years past. But, again, this one hit different. This time around, the abstract of simply building a social media following had turned into the tangible financial gain that could result from such an endeavor.

The building blocks for UK's basketball players to profit off NIL had already been laid. Now, the time had come to, possibly, cash in.

"Even before NIL was thought of, we've been having these talks about marketing ourselves and putting good stuff out there," Allen said. "So even that alone — I feel like that prepares you in itself. Just not putting bad things out there. Putting good stuff about yourself. Putting true things about yourself. That definitely prepared us."

THE INFLCR APP

A key component for Kentucky players to navigate this new NIL world came about before any of them set foot on UK's campus.

In late 2016 — seeing the changing landscape within college sports — entrepreneur Jim Cavale began toying with an approach to break into the business side of that world that would center on empowering student-athletes to build a bigger brand for themselves.

At the time, Cavale saw that most of the guidance surrounding college players and social media was negative. There were a lot of don'ts — cautionary tales of what not to do on Twitter and Facebook, warnings that putting yourself out there too much could lead to bad things for student-athletes.

Cavale wanted to focus on the dos, not the don'ts.

He had been watching developments like the O'Bannon case — the antitrust class action lawsuit filed against the NCAA — and figured changes to NIL rules were a matter of when, not if. And, in the meantime, Cavale saw a swiftly growing social

media landscape with intriguing possibilities but little positive guidance or reinforcement.

“Student-athletes were going to have more and more empowerment,” he said. “But they didn’t know what to do with it.”

Cavale started meeting with contacts in the college sports community. One of those was DeWayne Peevy, who, like Cavale, had once played baseball at the University of Montevallo. Peevy — now the athletics director at DePaul — was a top official in the UK athletics department who worked closely with the men’s basketball team and had been a confidante of John Calipari since the UK coach arrived in Lexington in 2009.

After a series of meetings, the UK men’s basketball team became the first college entity to sign a contract with Cavale. At the time, he didn’t have a product, just a prototype. After UK signed, he hired his first two engineers, and they got to work. The business venture turned into INFLCR (pronounced “influencer”) and it ultimately launched in 2017 with four clients: UK basketball, and the football programs at Auburn, UAB and Troy University.

INFLCR is now a leading company in the college sports business space, with more than 1,100 clients across the athletics landscape.

Cavale, recalling the first time Calipari introduced him to the UK basketball team, said the coach told his players that each one of them had come to Kentucky to train like a pro, practice like a pro, play like a pro, be responsible off the court like a pro.

“Now, we want to build our brand like a pro,” Calipari said at the time.

“And in 2017 — for a high-profile coach to say that — was unique,” Cavale told the Herald-Leader. “And that’s why we started slow. Not everybody was championing that message. We needed some flagship teams to really champion that message with us, and use our product and teach us what else we needed to build so we could build the very best technology to help kids build their brand like a pro. And he got it from day one.”

In those first few years, the INFLCR setup worked as a communication conduit between Kentucky’s players, their fans and the program itself. Through the company’s app, UK officials could upload photos, videos and additional content from games, practices and other team activities, and each individual player would have immediate access to that content, which could be used in their own social media posts.

It also allowed crossover exposure for team social media accounts and those of the individual players. Cavale used the example of a TV network and its local affiliates to explain the relationship between

the UK program — “a national channel” — and its players.

“The reality is, all of their student-athletes — or even their alums — are like affiliate channels,” he said. “And so, while Kentucky men’s basketball is like NBC, their point guard is NBC Detroit. And their shooting guard is NBC Atlanta. And their center is NBC L.A. So it’s the same type of model. So the opportunity to tap into the followings that those student-athletes — and pro athletes, once they go pro and they’re now alums — that they have garnered over the years; to tap into those followings, that’s huge for Kentucky.”

And, obviously, adding the Kentucky basketball brand to their own personal following is huge for these young players, from a marketing standpoint.

Putting the team and the players under the umbrella of one app also allowed UK’s program to monitor everyone’s social media output in one place, an advantage when working toward a positive and unified public message.

In addition to giving players access to quality content to share with their fans, Cavale wanted to show college athletes just how powerful their social media presence and message could be. The players, of course, could see their follower counts, but they also needed to understand how valuable that following could become.

They were given metrics on what types of posts did well, an understanding on how sharing and giving fans a look at unique aspects of a player’s life — on and off the court — could lead to larger followings and empower players to become their own “media channels,” as Cavale put it.

“Which, no matter what you do after college sports is over, it will help you set the stage for what’s next,” he said.

BREAKING INTO THE NIL ERA

The INFLCR app and its capabilities evolved over time, and July 1 brought its biggest transformation.

In the past year, there’s been an increased effort to educate players on the regulatory side of name, image and likeness, giving them an understanding of what is and what isn’t allowed under the NIL reforms.

An important added feature of the app allows players to enter into what is basically a digital marketplace with businesses that are looking for college athletes to endorse their product.

One partner in that space is Icon Source, an outfit that essentially plays matchmaker for those players and their prospective business partners.

The company was already well-established as an endorsement outlet for professional athletes, with more than 2,000

players and 250 agents from the pro realm on its platform.

Drew Butler, a former All-America punter at Georgia who spent five years in the NFL, had been closely following the NIL debate over the past couple of years, and he saw the opportunity for college athletes to use Icon Source’s platform in a similar way. After bringing him on as a consultant late last year, the company put him in charge of its college division.

Butler had studied the NIL proposals and realized that universities and athletics departments would be able to do quite a bit to help their players navigate the upcoming changes. They could educate them on the rules, advise them from a marketing standpoint, walk them through the compliance process to make sure they didn’t run afoul of any NCAA or university-specific restrictions. They could even partner with companies like INFLCR to get those players quality content to build their personal brands.

They could do just about everything. “Except help them get paid,” Butler said. “And that’s the hardest part.”

And that’s where Icon Source comes in.

Butler likened the way the company works to the house-hunting site Zillow.com or the dating site Match.com. With Icon Source, athletes and brand representatives can both create free profiles with information about themselves and what kind of endorsement partner they’re looking to connect with.

From there, athletes and brands can both search the database of possibilities for a match.

If a company wants to partner with a specific athlete, an athlete from a specific area or sport, or an athlete with specific likes and interests, all of that is searchable within the database.

Once a deal gets made, Icon Source handles all of the behind-the-scenes work and takes a 10 percent cut. They have safeguards in place to make sure payment is received by an athlete, and that the brand they’re dealing with won’t jeopardize their NCAA eligibility in any way. The information from each deal also goes straight to the compliance department at the player’s school for a final OK.

In the spring, Icon Source will provide each athlete a 1099 tax form with information from every one of their business agreements over the course of the year. The goal, Butler says, is to make things as easy as possible for the student-athlete.

He also stressed the importance of athletic departments educating their players on the process.

“This is a huge learning curve. It’s the biggest shift in collegiate athletics in over 100 years,” Butler said. “I think it is

extremely important that the universities expend all necessary resources to educate these student-athletes. I think it's up to them to tell these student-athletes how to go about this. The rights and wrongs. The rules and regulations. The dos and don'ts."

The UK men's basketball program was on the ground floor of one major aspect of NIL reform — years before it actually happened — but no one has all the answers in this evolving and uncertain landscape.

Lindsey said UK has had an NIL working group — led by executive associate AD Rachel Baker, who has a long record in compliance — and there have been ongoing conversations and planning, especially in regard to educating players on the process.

"We're still figuring it out. And it's going to be a process," Lindsey said. "But I think everybody in the country is dealing with that."

Some simply began that process from a more enviable position.

With so many NBA players going through Calipari's program over the past decade, UK men's basketball had already adopted many of the extras that other schools are now scrambling to put in place. There have been regular presentations from financial advisers, talks on how to manage careers from a business perspective, meetings with people like Cavale to help players think about building their brands.

In the past, a lot of that knowledge was for future use, when those Wildcats, they all hoped, made it to the NBA. Now, the possibilities of the future have turned into opportunities in the present.

"This is all new stuff for them. And it's maybe a little scary for them at first — as 18- and 19-year-old kids," Lindsey said. "But if this is the landscape that they want to enter into — if they want to take advantage of this opportunity — there is some responsibility on their part. They're going to have to think like businessmen a little bit."

Clearly, it didn't take long for some of them to start.

Allen, who filed two trademarks July 1 — "A11en" and "Dontaiie Allen" — with the intent to market sports apparel and his own basketball camps, cheerfully said that the T-shirt sales were going well, adding that he hoped to see some being worn by fans in Rupp Arena this coming season. Several of his teammates have also put together early NIL opportunities for themselves.

Cavale thought back to that first meeting with Calipari and his UK team at the time, four years ago, when many coaches and administrators still didn't want to embrace social media and even more looked at brand-building as an unnecessary

endeavor. He said he didn't know if his idea would have gotten off the ground if Calipari didn't buy into it in the early going.

"And now brand-building and social media for student-athletes is a line item in every school's budget. And that's the importance of this. The schools that are ahead — whether it's their head coach or their athletic director — have a top-down understanding of all of this. The schools that are behind are the ones that are just now realizing that, 'Oh my God, we don't have this.' "They're in that situation because, top down, there's not involvement. There's been committees put together and other people it's been delegated to, but the leaders of those programs don't understand this. And the leaders of these programs have to understand this, for them to win."

'This has changed my life.' McLendon Initiative revives UK staffer's athletic dreams

By Jerry Tipton | Lexington Herald-Leader
June 26

He was an aspiring basketball player, and had reason to be.

As a sixth-grader, Ceasar Adim was one of only three players at the AAU nationals who could already dunk. Seventh Woods and future Kentucky player Bam Adebayo were the other two.

"So, I've known Bam since we were 12 years old," he said this month.

As an eighth-grader, Adim made an impression on former UK player Wayne Turner. Both grew up in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury albeit two decades apart.

"Man, he was so dominant," Turner recalled recently. "He was like the LeBron James of that era in Boston."

Adim's mother, who has a keen interest in history, named him after the Roman emperor in hopes of fostering a desire to make a difference. She named his brother Lincoln in honor of the former United States president.

Adim grew to be 6-foot-4. Four surgeries on his left knee ended his playing career. But his athletic aspirations live on.

Adim (pronounced A-deem) is working in the UK athletics department as one of five "ambassadors," as staffers affiliated with the McLendon Minority Leadership Initiative are known. He works in the facilities and events operations department.

Adrien Harraway, vice president and director of the McLendon Foundation, keeps in regular contact with the 30 ambassadors working at 24 universities and for the National Association of Basketball Coaches. He said Adim has enjoyed the UK experience, which began last October and ends

on Wednesday.

"Oh, he loves it," Harraway said. "And his big thing now is to find his next opportunity. So, that's what he and I have really been meeting about."

Adim wants to be a basketball coach. As a player, he tried to think "two or three steps ahead," he said. His high school coach also inspired him.

Plus, he cited one other reason.

"I felt the reason I wanted to get into coaching was just because I wanted to help other kids achieve the dreams I couldn't achieve," he said. "Not because I wasn't good enough or tall enough or smart enough. Just because my body wouldn't let me."

Turner said Adim has the attributes to be a successful coach: "great smile . . . enthusiasm . . . very smart . . . he just has that ability to build relationships with different sorts of people."

Adim has worked the youth basketball camps UK has staged on campus and in various locales in Kentucky this month. He spoke of the experience — which had included working alongside UK players at the camps — as inspiring.

"I live through them a little bit . . ." he said. "So, for me, helping kids achieve the dreams I couldn't achieve myself I feel fulfills me as wanting to be a coach."

Adim originally committed to UMass because he thought the school afforded him the best chance to play soccer (forward) as well as basketball (wing).

The second knee surgery and a coaching change at UMass led him to enroll at UK. Turner helped connect him with Tim Asher, who is the coaching video coordinator for UK basketball. Adim worked on the video staff.

Adim referred to the former UK point guard as "my Uncle Wayne Turner." The two are not related, Turner said. It's an honorary title for a mentor.

"You develop a certain bond," Turner said. "It means more than big brother. He knows I have his back in all aspects of life."

Adim went to UMass in 2018 and worked as a senior manager on the basketball team. Then came the coronavirus pandemic and a return to Kentucky.

That the McLendon Minority Leadership Initiative was launched during a pandemic is not lost on Harraway. Positions were posted beginning last July, "which is crazy," he said.

UK Coach John Calipari has funded five positions at his school, plus one at North Carolina Central, where John McLendon began his Hall of Fame coaching career.

Louisville had two "ambassadors" in 2020-21. UK plans to have another five positions in the 2021-22 year, Harraway said.

Adim's experience at UK led to a

position in the 2021 NCAA Tournament “bubble.” He helped players and coaches navigate the COVID testing procedures, plus get from hotels to practices and games.

He recalled working with Villanova Coach Jay Wright, Michigan Coach Juwan Howard and Florida State Coach (and former UK assistant) Leonard Hamilton.

“A lot of these guys I got to know on a first-name basis,” Adim said.

In essence, these kinds of connections can translate into opportunity, which is the intent of the McLendon Minority Initiative.

“A lot of people like me don’t have that opportunity just because you don’t know the person in this kind of world,” Adim said. “It’s kind of hard. I think McLendon has changed my life just because it’s given me an opportunity to meet a lot of different people.

“For me personally, this is bigger than any championship just because this has changed my life.”

‘My beautiful chin’ is the inspiration for UK assistant coach’s nickname

By Jerry Tipton | Lexington Herald-Leader
June 20

New Kentucky assistant coach Ron “Chin” Coleman said he must have told the story of how he got the nickname a thousand times. So, Saturday marked the 1,001st.

He got it as a child growing up in Chicago. A friend named James (aka “E.T.” as in the Extra-Terrestrial) gave him the name.

“I guess it’s because of my chin,” Coleman said before adding, “my beautiful chin. And so it stuck with me ever since I was a kid.”

He went by “Chin” as a college player first for Weber State, and then Lamar. He scored 1,316 points in three seasons for Lamar.

Once his playing career ended after seven seasons overseas, Coleman turned to coaching and tried to lose the nickname.

“I thought, like, it’ll be more professional if I kind of got rid of my street name ... but I couldn’t get rid of it.”

As a beginner assistant coach at Colorado State, Coleman went by “Ron.” “It lasted a hot week,” he said.

Then Colorado State Coach Tim Miles advised Coleman to stick with the more distinctive “Chin.”

“Everywhere he went, it was this persona: Chin,” Miles told The Chicago Tribune last year. “It’s like Madonna or Pele. He’s calling himself Ronald? ‘No, dude. Chin, who you are is perfect. None of this Ronald stuff. No Ron. It’s Chin. Chin!’”

Now, some family members know him

as “Chin.”

“They don’t know me as ‘Little Ronald,’ which is what my mom calls me,” he said.

Coleman comes to Kentucky with a reputation as a fashion maven.

In speaking with reporters after a UK youth camp session Saturday, Coleman said his fashion sense extends beyond suits.

“You can’t be called a haberdasher if you can just put on a suit,” he said. “I can put on a suit. I can ‘street wear’ is what they call it. I can dress down. I got it all.”

Coleman uses a tailor. “So all my suits and shirts and ties and socks and all that stuff is tailor-made,” he said.

He added that his broad shoulders make shopping off the rack impossible.

“I can get rid of everything else,” he said. “I can slim down. I can keep a slim waist. But the shoulders aren’t going anywhere. They don’t have a diet for shoulders.”

The Chicago Tribune noted that Coleman’s custom-made suits feature “fine European threads.” He also had a thing for pocket squares and bright socks that slide into leather Ferragamo loafers.

Equipment managers at Illinois were known to check with Coleman about pre-game warm-up outfits for players.

Coleman approved Brad Underwood’s attire before the Illinois coach came on court for a game.

“I gave Coach Underwood some swag,” Coleman said. “I used to do his pocket squares for him.”

He was asked if he would be giving UK Coach John Calipari a wardrobe upgrade.

“I think Cal, he’s good money,” Coleman said. “I don’t have to do anything with Cal.”

Coleman lamented the cost of keeping fashionable.

“I’ve got a problem with shopping,” he said. “And it’s very expensive.”

He saluted Lexington for not having a high fashion store like Gucci’s within walking distance. Yes, he said, he’s transitioned to online shopping.

“I never was a guy who shopped online because I like to be able to see the stuff, feel it and touch it,” he said. “Man, I shop so much online now, it’s a shame.”

Coleman grew up in Chicago. He went to South Shore High School in Chicago.

As an assistant coach, he worked on staffs at Bradley (Peoria, Ill.), Illinois-Chicago and Illinois.

Coleman also coached for the Chicago-based AAU program known as Mac Irvin Fire, where he helped develop Jabari Parker and Jahliil Okafor. Other products of the program include former UK players Antoine Walker and Nazr Mohammed.

To augment his income, he also worked at the Chicago Public Schools central office, where his duties included placing substi-

tute teachers.

“I am Chicago,” said Coleman before adding that his recruiting contacts extend far beyond the Windy City.

“Chicago is my footprints,” he said. “But I’m not just only Chicago. I think I am a little bit more than that because I have relationships all over the country, and even abroad.”

Coleman said he has recruited players in Belgium, the former Soviet republic of Georgia, Nigeria and Sudan.

“In this particular field, you’ve got to connect the dots wherever they’re dribbling balls. Not just where they’re dribbling balls in Chicago. ... I think I have a long reach and it’s all about relationships.”

Coleman said he does not want to be typecast as a recruiter. He said he had two interviews for head coaching jobs this off-season before deciding to accept a position on Calipari’s Kentucky staff.

“I chose Kentucky because it’s Kentucky,” he said. “I know that’s very cliché and very simple to say. But Kentucky is different. It’s Kentucky. There’s no other place like Kentucky. ... I think Kentucky is the crème de la crème.”

In assessing a recruiting class, the judgments should include transfers, Coleman said.

With the transfer portal nearing 1,700 players, players from other colleges will be a regular part of recruiting into the future.

“You can’t swim against the current,” Coleman said. “You have to swim with the current.”

‘This is real and I’m home’: CJ Fredrick is back in Rupp Arena and this time he has a spot in the Kentucky locker room

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic
June 11

When CJ Fredrick showed up for move-in day at Kentucky on the last weekend in May, he didn’t know a trip down memory lane would be part of the experience. But as John Calipari led Fredrick and his family on a tour of Rupp Arena, where Fredrick scored 111 points in four games and won the 2018 state championship with Covington Catholic, the feelings it stirred only validated his decision to transfer home from Iowa.

“Very surreal to be back there in that way,” his father, Chuck Fredrick, says. “I tried to stay back, not bother him, just watch. I could tell it meant a lot to him, that a lot of things were going through his mind. CJ walked out there onto the floor by himself and just looked around. He was taking it all in, like, ‘Wow, I’m really here.’ It’s funny, I remember saying to my wife when they made the state finals, ‘He is

going to be so lucky to have played four games at Rupp Arena.' Looks like he'll get a few more than that now."

At the state tournament, where he shot 63 percent, scored more points than anyone in 14 years and won Sweet 16 MVP, Fredrick tried to sneak a peek inside the Kentucky locker room every time he walked past its doors. He never did get a great look at those \$3.1 million, NBA-style digs, in which a 2012 national championship banner hangs from the center of a glowing rotunda and the floor is the actual Final Four hardwood from New Orleans. Three years later, Calipari walked Fredrick right inside and pointed to a mahogany locker with his name on it.

"That was a great moment. It brought back all those memories," Fredrick says. "I had always wanted to just see what it was like. Then I actually got to go in, with Cal and the guys, and it was really cool to stand there and think, 'Now it's my locker room.'"

Different thoughts rushed in when he wandered through a tunnel and onto the arena floor that day. While replaying scenes from his last game in the building, he scanned the empty stands for Section 26. His grandfather, Charlie Fredrick, patriarch of a family known on both sides of the Ohio River for its prowess in sports, had sat up there at the back of Rupp Arena's lower bowl when Fredrick scored 32 points in the state final. Charlie died less than a year later, while Fredrick was redshirting at Iowa.

"That was the last place I saw him in the stands, the last time he watched me play," Fredrick says. "That's why this is so special to me. Every time I walk out there now, I'm going to have that image of where he was sitting when we won the whole thing. He was always pushing me — when everyone else told me how good I was, he'd be brutally honest — but he was definitely proud that day. My grandpa would've been really proud of this, me playing on this team. So I'll carry him with me through this journey."

To be clear, this is not the story of a boy who grew up in a Cats-crazed family dreaming of someday playing for Kentucky. But it is the story of a boy who grew up in a sports-crazed family of high achievers just 80 miles from Lexington. If not love, such proximity to the winningest program in college basketball history and its rabid fan base has always filled the Fredricks with reverence.

CJ Fredrick attended school in Northern Kentucky and won the state's Gatorade Player of the Year in 2018, but he lived on the Ohio side of the river, where his father, two uncles and an aunt were Cincinnati high school basketball stars. Chuck, Maurine and Joe Fredrick each left Greenhills

High as the all-time leader in points, Mike as the all-time leader in assists. They were all trying to impress Charlie, who played football at Notre Dame in the 1950s and then became a beloved high school coach and administrator in Kentucky and Ohio. He's in the respective hall of fame for schools in both states as well as the Ohio Athletic Directors Hall of Fame.

"My dad was all about taking on the biggest stage and toughest challenge," says Joe Fredrick, who scored 1,000 points and made 49 percent of his 3-point attempts for Digger Phelps and the Fighting Irish in the 1980s. "What is the pinnacle? Notre Dame football and Kentucky basketball. That's how my dad would have viewed this. He'd be proud of CJ for just really going for it, for jumping head-first into the deep end. We grew up going to Notre Dame-Kentucky games every year down at Freedom Hall, and we understand just how big that program is around here. It's difficult for people who don't grow up in the state to really grasp what it means to people, so I used to say if you took Notre Dame football, which is nationwide, and shrank that into one state, that's Kentucky basketball."

So is this: Last week, CJ Fredrick brought Calipari and the whole team home with him. The Wildcats are on a tour of the state, connecting with fans through community service projects and youth basketball camps, one of which just happened to be at Fredrick's alma mater, Covington Catholic. Outside the gymnasium, there is a wall that lists him as the school's single-season record holder for points, field goals and made 3-pointers. Inside the gym, a throng of children howled and their Kentucky-loving parents gawked as Fredrick and his very tall friends taught skills and ran drills. It was another moment of confirmation.

"That's when it really hit me, that this is real and I'm home," says Fredrick, who was 500 miles away the past three years at Iowa. He's careful to add that his experience there was great and Hawkeyes fans are plenty passionate themselves. "But here, it's a little bit different. These fans, they're the best in the country. There's no doubt about it. I'm really excited to play in front of them at Rupp this year. Being back here, being a Kentucky player, it's different for sure. It's a little ramped up. You can just feel the excitement."

In Iowa City, you can still feel the resentment. Not everyone is reading this as a feel-good story.

Hawkeyes coach Fran McCaffery, an assistant at Notre Dame when Uncle Joe played there, was at Rupp Arena the day Fredrick won that state championship. Calipari didn't even recruit him out of high school. So when Fredrick decided in April

to transfer after making 46.6 percent of his 3-point tries in two seasons at Iowa and starting all 52 games he played — and when rumor had it Kentucky was the favorite to land him — McCaffery and others lashed out.

On April 19, before Fredrick had publicly announced a decision to leave Iowa, the program put out a one-sentence statement breaking his news. On April 20, the Twitter account for Iowa's NCAA compliance staff offered some oddly timed advice: "A good reminder that a prospective DI or DII transfer needs to be entered into the transfer portal before any contact or communication occurs." The strong implication out of Fredrick's former program was that he'd been tampered with by Kentucky. Joe Fredrick seems to be at the center of that conspiracy theory.

The background: Joe and Calipari have been close for years now, initially connected through a mutual friend whose company runs the coach's annual fantasy camp and further entangled by a wide web of other basketball buddies. Joe's son attended UK and as a freshman was one of the handful of regular students chosen each year to live in the basketball players' lodge. Given that context, a two-word Facebook comment by Joe late last season raised a lot of eyebrows in Iowa and Kentucky.

To hear Joe tell it, his son's best friend, a Cats fan, was online complaining about another frustrating loss during a dismal 9-16 season. Specifically, Joe says, the complaint was about a lack of inside presence. So he replied, "Help is coming," and claims to have meant former West Virginia big man Oscar Tshiebwe, who had already transferred to Kentucky and was sitting out. But the friend wrote back: "I hope it's who I think you're talking about. We need a team-first mentality player who can shoot." And Joe repeated: "Help coming." The second half of that conversation was screenshot and shared widely.

After Fredrick's departure from Iowa and the school's terse reaction to it, Joe took to Facebook again to rant that the Hawkeyes were "childish" and "running CJ through the mud." In his first interview after signing with Kentucky, Fredrick said his new school "in no way reached out to me before the portal." But hard feelings clearly remain.

"I've known Fran since I was 19 years old," Joe says. "He's like family to me. This had nothing to do with him or the Iowa staff or that program. It was about a location that's just wonderful for our family and an opportunity for CJ to do what gives him the best chance to play at the next level. He asked what he should do and I told him it had to be his decision

alone. Personally, it was difficult. It still is. I'm not going to lie to you. The backlash was strong, and I was really disappointed by how Iowa handled it. Fran and I had a conversation when it happened and it's best we just leave it at that. He knows deep down I'll always support him — I love the guy with all my heart — but it's CJ's career, not mine, and he's blood."

It's hard to blame McCaffery for being upset about Fredrick's departure. He loses a 6-foot-3, almost 22-year-old guard whose 3-point percentages his first two seasons were better than any Iowa freshman or sophomore ever. He owns a nearly 3-to-1 career assist-to-turnover ratio, having given it away just 42 times in almost 1,400 minutes. He's happy to defer to star teammates, like national player of the year Luka Garza, but also willing and able to rise and fire in crucial moments.

It's equally as easy to see why Calipari was eager to add Fredrick as he attempts to reboot a program and offense that have clearly declined in recent years. Outside shooting was arguably the No. 1 need after last season. Since Doron Lamb made 46.6 percent of his 3s on the 2012 championship team, no Kentucky player (minimum 50 attempts) has hit better than 45 percent in a season. Fredrick made 47.4 percent as a sophomore.

He's tough too. Fredrick dealt with plantar fasciitis in his left foot all last season, when he missed four games and saw his average minutes drop 28.7 as a freshman to 24.7 as a sophomore. Some mornings, he'd climb out of bed and collapse upon taking his first step. It felt like he was in the training room all day every day just to get well enough to play. The only thing to be done with an injury like that is rest — five or six weeks of which finally provided relief this spring — but the Hawkeyes had a great season going and he wanted to be part of it.

"That injury is brutal to play on. Him even trying tells you something about the kid," Covington Catholic coach Scott Ruthsatz says. "True competitor, wants to win at everything, a great teammate, willing passer, doesn't make the kinds of mistakes that hurt a team over time. He's not going to take a bunch of bad shots and miss. He's going to do whatever is required to win. And CJ has three other big things going for him at Kentucky: He looks really good in blue and white (Covington Catholic's colors), he's wearing his old No. 1 from high school and he really, really plays well at Rupp Arena."

When Fredrick decided to enter the transfer portal, final exams were about to start at Iowa and he asked his father if it would be OK to list him as the contact for college coaches. Chuck Fredrick

agreed without giving it much thought. He certainly didn't expect his phone to blow up. In fact, the first night he told his wife he was worried nobody would call.

Then John Calipari did. Then coaches from North Carolina and Kansas and Gonzaga did. And so many more.

"Next thing I know, I'm getting familiar with a lot of new area codes all over the country," Chuck says. "But Coach Cal did the best job of sharing his vision and his culture, which matched ours. And the thing we really loved was that he had a conversation about where CJ's game needed work. As a parent, I appreciated that. The world we live in today, everybody tells you that you're the best, so it's refreshing to hear somebody say, 'Here's how you can get better.' That's what we wanted for CJ"

Charlie Fredrick would sure love that.

Kentucky freshman Bryce Hopkins blends 'old man' game with positionless basketball

By Ben Roberts | Lexington Herald-Leader
June 10

In this busy Kentucky basketball off-season with so many late additions to the roster, four-star recruit Bryce Hopkins has been a forgotten man of sorts.

Much of the attention the past few months has been on the construction of John Calipari's new backcourt, with the arrival of three instant-impact transfer guards and the late signing of five-star playmaker TyTy Washington.

More recently, there was the low-key announcement that Keion Brooks — a similarly positioned player as Hopkins — would return for his third season as a Wildcat, a decision that could lessen Hopkins' expected impact in his freshman year.

Of course, the recruiting rankings say Hopkins is the least touted of Calipari's latest class. Washington and power forward Daimion Collins — the other two UK signees — are both consensus top-15 recruits nationally. Hopkins — a 6-foot-7, 220-pound wing from the Chicago area — is No. 36 on that list.

So, what can Kentucky fans expect from Hopkins in year one?

"Anything that Coach Cal wants me to bring to the table," he said matter-of-factly Thursday.

That's the right attitude for a UK newcomer.

Hopkins was speaking from South Oldham High School, the latest stop on UK's basketball camp tour this month and the first real chance for most of these Wildcats to connect with fans across the state.

In the camp setting, it's fun and games, making sure the kids have a good time.

Once the games begin, it'll obviously be

different. And Hopkins has a good idea of what it is Calipari will want him to bring to the court.

"He's really said he wants me to bring my tough grittiness that I bring from Chicago," he said. "Stuff like that. So I'm going to be playing hard, playing good defense. ..."

"Growing up, nothing was ever handed to me. My dad instilled in me to just be tough and take what you want. Coach Cal didn't guarantee me anything when I came here. He just said I'm going to have to take what I need. And that's what I came here to do. So, looking forward to it."

Ask around about Hopkins, and "tough" is usually one of the first words you hear.

"Bryce imposes his physicality on other players," his high school coach, Staunton Peck, told the Herald-Leader. "Guys bounce off of Bryce. Bryce is not the kind of guy who doesn't finish through contact or shies away from contact. I think, in many ways, part of Bryce's game is like an 'old man' game, where he just has that old-man, full-body strength.

"I'm not a basketball guru, but I've seen a lot of high school basketball players over the past couple of years, and I don't think anybody has been even close to as physically imposing as Bryce is."

That might be what he's asked to do at the beginning — provide a gritty, physical brand of basketball that was often missing from last season's 9-16 team — but that's not all Hopkins can be. And he came to Kentucky expecting to be much more.

This past season was shortened in Illinois due to COVID-19, but Hopkins was ultimately named the MaxPreps.com state player of the year after averaging 24.4 points, 12.5 rebounds and about three assists per game. He led Fenwick School to a 13-3 record and an 11-1 showing in the ultra-competitive Chicago Catholic League.

Hopkins played point guard at times, center at times. He got teammates involved. He emerged as a veteran leader. Others fed off his confidence. Peck said he shot nearly 40 percent from three-point range. Offensively, he can play on the perimeter. Defensively, his coach said he has the length, toughness and versatility to guard opposing centers in college.

"He can pretty much do it all," Peck said. "I think he's a modern basketball player in terms of being positionless."

This time last year, Hopkins wasn't even being recruited by Kentucky.

There was a good reason for that. He was committed to Louisville.

Hopkins backed out of that pledge in August and signed with the Wildcats three months later. With the NCAA banning all official recruiting visits due to COVID-19, he wasn't allowed to get the full campus treatment from UK's coaches before com-

mitting to the Cats. Instead, he and his family drove from Chicago to Lexington on their own dime. A few weeks later, he picked UK.

"I felt this was the best situation for me," Hopkins said Thursday. "If I come here and do what I have to do, I know I can get to the next level, with all that Coach Cal has to offer. ... It wasn't anything personal with (Louisville). I just wanted to do what's best for me, for my dreams — to get to the NBA."

He comes to Kentucky as part of a team that should be packed with talent, and that could make considerable playing time tough to come by in the early going.

Calipari has talked about playing three-guard lineups, and the UK coach should have several talented options to work with. Brooks will certainly be on the court quite a bit. Jacob Toppin and Lance Ware could be in for breakout seasons, and Collins and Oscar Tshiebwe will surely get plenty of run.

Hopkins isn't backing down from the competition, however. And, even if it takes the UK freshman a bit to find his footing, his former coach doesn't expect him to get discouraged.

Peck said Hopkins didn't play much in his early days at Fenwick, a top program in the basketball-rich Chicago area. There were always rumors that he might transfer elsewhere for more guaranteed playing time. Then, once he developed into a nationally known recruit, those rumors had him jumping ship to a big-time prep school that played a national schedule.

Every time he heard something like that, Peck would go straight to Hopkins' family.

Every time he did, he'd get the same answer. "Relax," was the tone of that feedback. "Bryce isn't going anywhere." Obviously, they were true to their word.

"His parents' response wasn't, 'Hey, maybe we should go somewhere else.' The response was, 'You need to work harder.' So I think that attitude and that mindset is only going to help him succeed in whatever he's asked to do at Kentucky," Peck said. "And Bryce is not going to show up at Kentucky and just take over the world. I don't think that happens for anybody. But he has the support system and experience where his response to adversity is not giving up or moving on. It's just working harder and pushing through adversity to become stronger."

"So, to me, that's one of the biggest strengths that Kentucky is going to get: a guy who's willing to fail. And failure is fine, because that's going to motivate him to get better."

Toward the end of Hopkins' first meeting with reporters from around the state Thursday, teammate Lance Ware joined the

gaggle. Just a few minutes earlier, Hopkins said Ware had been like a "big brother" to him in his first couple of weeks on campus, showing him the ropes and answering his questions.

Ware smiled and playfully nodded along with Hopkins' responses to reporters. When there were no more questions, Ware grabbed a microphone and asked his own.

"How does this feel being your first official college interview?"

The freshman grinned nervously.

"It's a little nerve-racking with all the cameras," Hopkins acknowledged. "But you get used to it here."

Lance Ware wants to be an answer man for this Kentucky basketball team

By John Clay | Lexington Herald-Leader
June 9

Last season, Lance Ware pestered teammate Keion Brooks with so many questions it got to be a running joke.

"Last year, I was asking Keion a lot of questions," Ware said Wednesday. "We would always make fun of me because I was asking questions. 'Yo, Keion, what are we about to do? What's happening here?' Keion always answered my questions, so I'm kind of giving back the same love Keion gave me."

After all, in 2020-21, Brooks was the lone Kentucky basketball returnee who had played any significant minutes the previous season. The 6-foot-7 forward from Fort Wayne, Ind., is back for his junior campaign, but this time around Brooks has some help in the institutional knowledge department thanks to the return of Dontaie Allen, Jacob Toppin and, yes, Ware, a 6-9 sophomore forward from Camden, N.J.

"It's different being at Kentucky," Ware said. "The (transfers) might have been at school for two, three, four years but at their school it wasn't like this. So having me, Jacob, Dontaie and obviously Keion help guide and give advice is big."

That lack of experience was surely a factor in John Calipari's team free fall to a 9-16 record in 2020-21. There were other factors, however, an important one being that the coronavirus pandemic kept Ware and his teammates from the total experience of being a basketball Wildcat playing for a basketball-crazed fan base.

Part of the process is the interaction between players and young UK fans the players have been experiencing at Calipari's satellite camps throughout the state, including Wednesday's stop at North Laurel High School in London.

"It's been super fun because we didn't get a chance to do this last year," Ware said. "My personality, I like being around

people. I like having people enjoy their time with me. Being able to see the love, there's no better feeling."

The camps have also contained a bonding benefit for a team that welcomes seven newcomers, including freshmen Daimion Collins, TyTy Washington and Bryce Hopkins, along with transfers CJ Fredrick (Iowa), Sahvir Wheeler (Georgia), Oscar Tshiebwe (West Virginia) and Kellan Grady (Davidson).

"Last year, when Cal was saying we were missing out on a whole bunch, I really didn't understand until I got here," Ware said Wednesday at North Laurel. "I can obviously see what he's talking about because we're together. We're taking these drives two hours, an hour and a half up to these schools. Being able to hang out with each other is great."

A four-star prospect ranked 39th in the class of 2020 by 247Sports, Ware played in 21 games last season, starting three. Though he averaged just two points and three rebounds in 12 minutes per contest, he exhibited contagious energy and a willingness to work to improve.

So what can we expect for his sophomore season?

"You can expect a lot," Ware said. "You can expect a leader. Keep the same stuff obviously I was doing last year. Playing hard. But the big thing I'm working on is learning from my mistakes, watching film of last year. As a freshman, I made some freshman mistakes, silly mistakes. Fix all that and be able to stay on the court and make an impact."

And has Ware seen the impact of the newcomers — point guards Washington and Wheeler, perimeter shooters Grady and Frederick, as well as the inside muscle of a Tshiebwe?

"Absolutely," he said. "Guys can really shoot the ball. And it's not just make a shot, but consistently shoot the ball. Bigger than shooting the ball, I just see a lot of guys out there who know how to play basketball. That's huge. If you can shoot the ball but you don't know how to run an offense or don't understand the game, it's not that effective. But I see guys that know how to play the game, and can shoot and can score and pass. That's what I'm most impressed about."

And if they have questions? Ask Lance. Here's a responsibility that goes with it."

What will be different about Kentucky basketball's rebooted approach to recruiting?

By Ben Roberts | Lexington Herald-Leader
June 7

With the NCAA's "dead period" finally over, college campuses have reopened

for high school basketball prospects, and coaches will soon be back on the recruiting trail to get a look at those players in person.

For Kentucky, the return to normalcy will coincide with massive change. Both in personnel and, apparently, approach.

When college coaches were last permitted to host recruits on campus and see them in person off campus — back in early 2020, before the COVID-19 shutdown — John Calipari's staff of assistants consisted of Kenny Payne, Tony Barbee and Joel Justus.

All three of those coaches are gone, with Orlando Antigua, Chin Coleman and Jai Lucas now holding their positions. Lucas, viewed as one of the top young assistants in the country, arrived in Lexington late last summer, but the next couple of months will bring his first chance to host recruits on UK's campus and evaluate prospects on Kentucky's behalf on the recruiting trail.

Antigua, of course, has been here before — a UK assistant from 2009 to 2014 — and he and Coleman, who were both hired last month, spent the past four seasons together at Illinois.

Until the start of UK basketball camps last week, the three hadn't interacted as a group.

"They've been great," Lucas said at the Ashland camp Thursday. "This is really the first week that we've gotten to really interact and be around each other. So getting to be around them, getting to interact with them, they've been amazing."

Despite the fresh introductions, a common theme has been forming among this trio, one that harkens back to the early days of the Calipari era, and one that might be a switch from recent years.

These assistants have ample on-the-court chops, but an obvious goal of bringing this group of coaches together will be to once again dominate the recruiting trail. All three bring a reputation as successful recruiters and relationship-builders, and expectations on that front moving forward will be oversized, even by Calipari-era standards.

Asked last week what he expected the recruiting dynamic to look like with this new staff, Lucas offered a telling response.

"I think the biggest thing is just being on the same page," he said. "Everybody doing a little bit of communication in recruiting. And it's not just, 'Oh, this guy is recruiting this guy.' We're all, 'The University of Kentucky is recruiting this guy.' And I think that's the one thing that will be a big difference, and something that'll be a little bit different than it has been in the past."

Kentucky had plenty of recruiting successes in the five years that the staff

consisted of Payne, Barbee and Justus, but that period was also marked — both inside and outside the program — by a perception of disjointedness in the approach to recruiting.

While there was collaboration within the staff, narratives quickly formed that individual targets were "Payne guys" or "Barbee guys" or "Justus guys," depending on who was viewed as UK's lead recruiter in each case. And, in many instances, there was a sense that the collaboration was lacking, that the proper communication wasn't there.

Perhaps sensing that disconnect, Calipari reconfigured his staff before the 2020-21 season, basically setting up a two-pronged approach with Justus and the newly arrived Lucas at the top, organizing Kentucky's recruiting efforts.

"I want you on that recruiting 10 hours a day," Calipari said of the duo.

That plan, while looking good on paper, never had a chance in the short term.

The restrictions in place for COVID-19 completely revamped recruiting, relegating coaches to Zoom meetings and phone calls rather than in-person visits and evaluations. By the time the dead period was lifted last week, Justus had moved on to Arizona State.

The NCAA rules were a little different when Calipari first came to Kentucky in 2009.

Then, only two assistant coaches were allowed to be on the recruiting trail alongside the head coach. In year one, that meant Antigua and Rod Strickland were often UK's main recruiters behind Calipari, with Strickland moving to an administrative role in 2010 and Payne replacing him.

It was in those first few years that UK had its most successful recruiting run, coinciding with its most success on the court. It was a few years later, when the NCAA allowed three assistants to actively recruit, that the perception of a splintered approach began to set in at Kentucky.

Longtime Calipari assistant John Robic — an integral part of the UK staff from a game-planning and opposition-research perspective — was moved to a new position, in part, to keep him active with those duties so a third assistant could be added to focus more on off-campus recruiting.

Obviously, the college basketball landscape on and off the court has changed considerably since those early, unbelievably successful days of the Calipari era, but the UK coach's plan for Justus, who was able to bring in many of the team's top players over the past few years, and Lucas to head up the Cats' recruiting efforts seemed like a throwback to that early dynamic.

Moving forward, that appears to be

what Antigua, Coleman and Lucas have in mind.

When asked last month about his own recruiting success in his first stint here, Antigua redirected that credit. He talked about "a lot of great synergy and togetherness" on those early Kentucky coaching staffs.

"I was a part of a really, really good team. I didn't get anybody," he said. "We were able to go and recruit and get (players). I was just happy to be a spoke in that wheel, and it's that same kind of wheel that we have now is how we're going to approach our recruiting."

Antigua and Coleman were able to amass and help develop enough talent at Illinois that the program reached the status of a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament in year four of a rebuild last season. More importantly for Kentucky's future, the two coaches, who had known each other before teaming up in Champaign, found that they worked well together.

"He and I have an unbelievable chemistry. Our connection is unbelievable," Coleman said. "We're really, really tight and we're like brothers. We're able to work really well alongside one another, and that just makes for a strong union."

Lucas is looking forward to joining that dynamic.

Last week, the 32-year-old assistant talked very much in terms of a team approach to the recruiting trail, one that values collaboration and communication as Kentucky's basketball program redoubles its efforts to bring the nation's best prospects to Lexington.

The first test of this new coaching configuration is coming soon. The first round of official visits hosted by Kentucky in 15 months will start a few days from now, with class of 2022 commitment Skyy Clark coming to campus this weekend and other visits set up for later in the month.

In July, the shoe company circuits return with 10 days set aside for in-person evaluation over a three-week period. It'll be the first time in more than seven years that Antigua is out on the recruiting trail wearing UK blue, and it'll be the first opportunity to do so for Coleman and Lucas.

It won't be long before this coaching staff's first commitments will start rolling in. The goal is clear, and the approach will be interesting to watch.

"I think the biggest thing is just getting the best player we can find, and then we'll kind of figure it out from there," Lucas said. "And I think that's the one thing that Coach Cal has always preached — the way basketball is going, it's really going positionless. So you need somebody who can dribble, pass and shoot, whether they're 5-10 or 6-11. So I think if we can get the best

player we can find, then it doesn't matter what size or what position they are. We'll figure out a way to play him."

Coming back: Keion Brooks on a return to Kentucky ... and normalcy

By Kyle Tucker | The Athletic | June 5

Keion Brooks grinned devilishly and grade-school children in tiny replica jerseys squealed as their 6-foot-7 hero swatted layup attempt after layup attempt without a hint of mercy or remorse. The consolation prize for relentless rejection: Brooks periodically dropped to one knee, slung an arm around them and flashed a wide, toothy smile as proud parents scrambled to snap pictures of a moment their families will treasure for a lifetime.

Oh, right, this is what Kentucky basketball looks like.

Fifteen months after a pandemic canceled the 2020 NCAA Tournament, three months after the Wildcats finished a zombie season that will be remembered for isolation, empty arenas and the program's worst record in almost a century, John Calipari has rebuilt his roster, remade his coaching staff and begun reconnecting with a fan base that badly needed this. The new team is a week into its barnstorming tour of the state, putting on youth basketball clinics and rekindling some of the joy that has been missing. Last year's team was almost entirely cut off from what makes Kentucky such a unique place to play college basketball: the adoration of and interaction with its Big Blue Nation.

Devin Askew, Brandon Boston Jr., Terrence Clarke, Cam'Ron Fletcher, Isaiah Jackson and Olivier Sarr all left after their lone season in Lexington having never witnessed the spectacle of a Madness cam-pout or heard the roar of Rupp Arena or the seen saucer-eyed wonder in a gym full of kids who cannot fathom how tall these guys from TV are in real life.

"I felt bad for them," Brooks said of last season's teammates. "Because it sucked. They didn't get to experience what really playing at Kentucky was like. Being surrounded by fans that love you and support you no matter what, it makes you feel good. It can inspire you to go out there and play harder, play better. This year, we're kind of getting back to normal and hopefully, they can really experience what it's like to be here."

DISCLAIMER: Side effects of the Deluxe UK Player Experience include extreme autograph fatigue and fan panic over your future.

That Brooks is back for more is a surprise to some. Since Calipari arrived in 2009, the list of five-star recruits staying three years at Kentucky is mighty short.

Alex Poythress, Marcus Lee, Nick Richards and Brooks. That's it. That's the list. Every other top-25 prospect Calipari signed has turned pro or transferred within two seasons. Now throw in the NCAA's new one-time transfer rule and the waiver wire it essentially created, and you get this bizarre new reality: If a UK player does not explicitly announce his intention to return soon after the season, most fans assume he's gone.

Sometimes you don't even get that long. Rumors about Brooks considering a transfer — closer to home at Indiana was the popular thought — spread like wildfire on the internet within minutes of the Wildcats' final game in March.

"Before he even took his uniform off," his father, Keion Brooks Sr., told The Athletic. "It was crazy. I know that's the stuff that keeps fans having something to talk about, that drama is exciting. I understand that, but it was funny that everyone wanted him to announce something. Don't you gotta leave and go somewhere to have a reason to announce you're coming back?"

Brooks never declared for the NBA Draft. He never put his name in the NCAA transfer portal. He never moved out of the lodge, never stopped working out with the rest of UK's returning players. He finished the spring semester, went home to see his family for a couple of weeks then returned for summer school. What exactly did he need to formally announce? That he's doing what thousands of college athletes all over the country do by preparing to start his junior season at the same school where he started? Only at Kentucky is this an issue. To the great consternation of those panicky fans, Brooks simply said nothing at all.

Then finally, during a Q&A session with reporters at the end of May, Calipari said he expects Brooks to be a leader for Kentucky this season. "This should be Keion's year," he added. And everyone who feared otherwise exhaled. When Brooks showed up with the rest of his squad for the camp tour last week, it was unofficially official. He's back, although we never did get an officially official declaration of that fact. Because why would we?

"I don't know where all the hoopla and speculation came from. Probably because I didn't come out and announce it," he said Friday. "To me, it's not really a big deal. I don't see why I should have to announce I'm coming back to school, but I guess that's what people look for now. It's a little weird. It's kind of funny. But I knew what I signed up for."

Brooks is back precisely because he went in with eyes wide open. To choose Kentucky is to embrace the biggest stage, biggest circus and biggest challenge of your

life. He played sparingly as a freshman and solidly as a sophomore, averaging 10.3 points, 6.8 rebounds and 1.6 steals in 16 games after returning from a calf injury. That injury, handled delicately because it can be a precursor to the much more devastating Achilles rupture, cost him three months of full-contact basketball — all of preseason training and the first nine games.

Before he got hurt, Brooks said he was in the best shape of his life, shooting it great and aimed to prove he is a pro. He still plans to. The timeline just changed. He didn't feel pressure to move on from Kentucky because he watched former five-star recruits PJ Washington, Immanuel Quickley and Richards all need two or three years in the program before they were ready to become NBA draft picks.

"They made it OK to come back," Brooks said. "My journey wasn't to be one-and-done. It took me a couple years. I'm just going to continue to try to get better and hopefully reach my dreams."

That pursuit made it pointless to switch schools. If someone in his camp was putting out feelers to other programs, which is certainly conceivable, it was not at Brooks' request.

"Keion was always committed to coming back," his father said. "If the pro thing wasn't an option, he was all-in about being at Kentucky. That's the place where you figure out how to be a pro. If the NBA is your goal, where else is better to help get you there? That has been his mindset all along, because he understands if he can make it at Kentucky, he can make it anywhere. He would never back away from that challenge."

So now the challenge is to lead a team with seven new players and to make enough 3-point shots to stay on the floor, either as an oversized wing or a stretch-4, in what Calipari would like to be a more modern-looking offense. Brooks shot 30 percent from deep on the Nike grassroots circuit and almost 40 percent at prep power La Lumiere, but he is so far just 11-for-47 shooting from 3-point range (23.4 percent) in his Kentucky career.

"I've got to get better shooting the 3, attacking people off the dribble, being more perimeter-oriented," he said. "The game is changing, and I don't want to get left behind."

The leadership piece should be no problem. Brooks is already the most respected member of the team, the most fluent translator of what Calipari screams into what he actually means, with the most perspective about what went wrong last season. He isn't willing to write it off as a disastrous fluke.

"I can't be ignorant of what happened,"

Brooks said. “I’ve got to try to weed out some of the things that weren’t successful for us last year, weed out some of the stuff that was a detriment to us, and come into this year with a different mindset so none of those things happen again. Me and (Calipari) are working together to try to make sure this year is different from last year. We’re on the same page.”

And what’s at the top of their don’t-do list?

“Just don’t put yourself before the team,” Brooks said, “and don’t be above spending time with your teammates. That’s really important. The more time we spend together, the more chemistry we build, the more camaraderie we build. When we step on the court you feel like you don’t want to let your teammate down, because that’s your brother. Once you build that, you’re tough to beat.”

COVID-19 protocols prevented a lot of the normal bonding experiences last summer, and Brooks’ injury kept him from ever feeling like he’d earned the right to step in and correct some of the things he knew were hurting that team. He won’t hesitate to take charge now.

“You try to lead as much as you can, but it gets difficult when you’re not actually out there in the trenches with them, so you try not to be overbearing,” he said. “This year, I’m healthy and I’m going to lead more by example, not just vocally from the sideline, and I think that will be a big difference for our team. Because you can yell at somebody and they can respond, ‘Well, what are you doing?’ Yeah, well, you got a point there. Now I can go out there and show them how it’s done.”

His new teammates include three top-30 freshmen and four coveted transfers, a group that, at least on paper, has addressed every on-court deficiency from last season: point guard play, outside shooting and a rugged inside presence. Even if Brooks did flirt with the idea of a transfer early on, seeing the rest of Kentucky’s roster take shape had to be reassuring.

“That makes it a lot easier to be excited,” his father said. “When you watch Cal going at it hard to bring some great guys together, to see all the work he’s done, not just with players but also building his staff, that shows us Cal is doing everything in his power to get this thing right.”

Jai Lucas getting the full Kentucky experience before he takes UK’s pitch on the road

By Ben Roberts | Lexington Herald-Leader June 1

It took about nine months to happen, but Jai Lucas is finally beginning to get a proper introduction to Kentucky basketball.

As one of John Calipari’s primary salesmen out on the recruiting trail, Lucas has welcomed the education and understanding that has come along with the past few days.

Standing against the wall of the Boyd County Middle School gym — the third of several stops on the UK basketball camp tour this month — Lucas marveled Thursday afternoon at the passion the folks in Ashland showed toward their favorite basketball program. Kentucky’s players and coaches were met with similar sights Tuesday and Wednesday in Bardstown and Union, and they’ll see more of the same over the next couple of weeks.

Adoring kids in UK gear scattered around the court. Attentive parents and other onlookers standing on the sidelines and sitting in the bleachers. After the trying last year or so, things are finally looking a little bit normal, something Lucas has yet to experience as part of the Wildcats.

“The big thing you get — and I’ve gotten — is how much people care about Kentucky basketball,” Lucas said. “And how important it is to them. And how important it is in the state. Not being able to do any of this stuff last year, I think it’s good for them to see how much people love them and how much people appreciate what they do.

“You know it, but you don’t really know how big it is until you’re in it.”

Lucas — after nine long months — is finally in it.

The former McDonald’s All-American point guard was recruited hard by Kentucky before ultimately choosing Florida — and later transferring to Texas — so he knew a little about the UK program and its passionate fan base before joining the Wildcats’ staff late last summer.

But this week — being out among the fans, in person, for the first time — is a welcome change in a tenure that has already been filled with upheaval.

Lucas, who had spent the previous four years as an assistant coach at Texas, was hired late last August as special assistant to the head coach and recruiting coordinator, a job he held for roughly two months before Calipari announced that he was promoting him to a full assistant coach before the start of the 2020-21 season.

In that role — in addition to his on-court coaching duties — Lucas was expected to head up UK’s recruiting efforts with fellow assistant coach Joel Justus. Of course, the unprecedented circumstances with COVID-19 meant no recruiting travel and no ability to host prospects for on-campus visits.

And Calipari’s original plan for a recruiting machine spearheaded by Justus and Lucas — viewed as two of the top young

recruiters in college basketball — was nixed before it even had a chance to really get started, with Justus leaving UK for Arizona State this offseason, a few weeks prior to the NCAA lifting its “dead period” that once again allowed coaches to see recruits play in person and bring them to their colleges for campus visits.

The time between Lucas’ hire and now also saw one of the worst seasons in Kentucky basketball history and an overhaul of the recruiting landscape, with transfers taking on just as much importance as traditional high school prospects.

So, it’s been a lot, to say the least.

Lucas noted that last year — even when players were able to arrive on campus and start team activities — it was still a “one ball, one player, one coach, one goal” type of deal.

On Thursday, he looked forward to a more “normal” 2021-22 campaign, the start of which has been seen over the past few days with the arrival of the next group of Wildcats on campus and this series of camps across the state.

Lucas also looked forward to this season’s team hopefully getting to experience the atmosphere of playing in front of 20,000-plus fans in Rupp Arena. He pointed out that Keion Brooks was really the only player on the team that had enjoyed that to any extent. Then he started to go down the roster. Walk-on Brennan Canada played in a handful of games during that last “normal” 2019-20 season. Dontaie Allen and Zan Payne sat on the bench then as redshirts. But no one else on the team has ever been on the cheering end of a full-throated Rupp Arena crowd, Lucas said, before clearly having a revelation.

“And me,” he shrugged. “I’ve never experienced that.”

The departure of Justus and longtime assistant Tony Barbee also led to the arrival of Ron “Chin” Coleman and the return of Orlando Antigua to join Lucas as Calipari’s three assistants.

This week has also marked the first time that Lucas has had a chance to be around Antigua and Coleman, who coached at Illinois together for the past four seasons, in person.

“They’ve been amazing,” he said.

They’ll be expected to produce amazing results both on the court and on the recruiting trail.

Lucas, who turned 32 years old in December, talked excitedly about getting to welcome recruits to campus for the first time as a Kentucky coach, a process that will start later this month with a series of official visits.

In July, the Wildcats’ staff will be back out on the shoe company circuits, finally getting an in-person look at the players

they've been talking to on the phone and through video conferences for the past 15 months.

More campus visits will follow that, and by the fall, Calipari and Lucas and UK's other coaches will be back out on the trail, seeing high school kids in their gyms and visiting with families in their homes.

"That's the best part," Lucas said. "You can kind of build a different type of relationship when you're able to be around people face to face (rather) than a Zoom and things like that. And just getting out and starting to feel like we're getting back to what our normal job is — we're excited."

Why Dontaie Allen decided to re-turn to Kentucky basketball instead of transferring

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal
June 2

The transfer portal may have upended college basketball this offseason, but at least one Kentucky player says he had no interest in testing out the sport's latest trend.

"The biggest thing for me was I pride myself in working hard," sophomore guard Dontaie Allen said Wednesday at UK's satellite camp at Ryle High School. "I'm not a quitter by any means. So, coming back, it was more, what else do I got to add into my regimen? What do I have to do differently?"

Allen showed off his immense scoring potential in a handful of games during his debut season as a redshirt freshman in 2020-21 but spent most of the year bouncing in and out of the primary rotation.

The former Pendleton County High School star played in just four of Kentucky's first six games, logging no more than nine minutes in any of those appearances. As calls from Big Blue Nation for the rare in-state player in the Calipari era to play more peaked during the team's 1-6 start, Allen erupted for 23 points on 8-of-13 shooting in a double-overtime win at Mississippi State in the SEC opener.

Allen followed that performance with 14 points in 32 minutes against Vanderbilt three days later, but he reached double digits in points just one more time in the regular season. Allen scored just eight points in Kentucky's final nine regular season games. He played more than four minutes just once in the final five regular season games.

With Kentucky's season on the line, Allen starred again in the rematch with Mississippi State in the SEC Tournament, scoring 23 points in 29 minutes, but the Wildcats lost the game, ending the season.

While Allen's defensive limitations made it difficult to justify arguing for a larger

role when he was not scoring consistently, complaints from Kentucky fans about his small role remained. Many speculated inconsistent minutes would lead Allen to transfer to a program where his stellar 3-point shooting ability would be valued more, but in the immediate aftermath of the SEC Tournament loss, Allen signaled his intention to return by issuing a plea for fans continue to support players moving forward after an embarrassing 9-16 season.

"I think the big thing with me was I was just playing my game," Allen said. "A lot of things could distract to certain people in that position, but me, I just kept my head down and kept working."

Now, Allen faces another uncertain path to minutes.

Calipari has placed a greater emphasis on 3-point shooting ability in constructing the 2021-22 roster, and Allen is no longer the unquestioned best shooter on the team.

Iowa transfer C.J. Fredrick, the former Covington Catholic High School star, converted 46.6% of his 3-point attempts (83 for 178) in the last two seasons. Davidson transfer Kellan Grady 36.6% from 3-point range in the last four seasons and 38.2% (58 for 152) last season. Five-star point guard signee TyTy Washington is considered a strong shooter and could play off the ball alongside Georgia point guard transfer Sahvir Wheeler at times.

Instead of seeing the increased competition for minutes in the backcourt as a possible reason to explore his transfer options, Allen said he is excited about what the presence of other knockdown shooters on the team can do for his game.

"Obviously, I was that kind of player last year," he said. "That's what we needed on the team. I can show more of my total game."

Improving his ball-handling is goal No. 1 this offseason, so teams can no longer defend him as a spot-up shooter alone. Building confidence to take shots even when he might not be wide open is another key step in his development.

Allen's role will become even less certain if Davion Mintz removes his name from the NBA draft to use the extra year of eligibility granted all players due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Allen repeatedly said he is focusing on what he can control this summer.

"I hope (Mintz) comes back, but at the end of the day, from my point of view, I want him to do what's best for him and his family," Allen said. "...I've always prided myself in working hard, and I think I'll continue to do that."

Kentucky basketball's Jacob Toppin aiming high: 'I'm going to have a breakout year.'

By Jerry Tipton | Lexington Herald-Leader
June 1

Kentucky basketball — players, coaches and support staff — moved an hour west to Bardstown on Tuesday to conduct the first in a series of youth camps. About 70 boys and girls participated in the opening session at Thomas Nelson High School.

During a question-and-answer period, children asked UK Coach John Calipari to name the team's tallest player, the strongest player and ultimately the best player.

It got interesting when a child asked who was the best dunker.

"Jacob Toppin," Calipari said before adding, "He thinks he's better than his brother."

That was saying something since Obi Toppin was the National Player of the Year in 2019-20.

When asked in a postgame interview session a direct question — did he really think he was better than his brother? — Jacob Toppin gave a direct answer.

"Yes, I do," he said. "I think I have the confidence in myself that I can be better than him. Right now, I'm probably not. But I can definitely be better than my brother."

Toppin acknowledged that there was a difference of opinion within the family. "He probably thinks he's better than me," he conceded. "So, it's a competition between us."

Obi Toppin averaged 20 points and 7.5 rebounds in his celebrated sophomore season of 2019-20.

After transferring to Kentucky from Rhode Island, Jacob Toppin averaged 5.2 points and 3.5 rebounds.

He suggested those modest numbers were mere prelude.

"I'm excited for it," he said of the better-than-big-brother talk. "I like the challenge. It's no pressure because, to me, myself, I feel like I'm going to have a breakout year."

Toppin spoke of working diligently this offseason to dramatically improve in 2021-22. He seemed to put a priority on shooting better from beyond the arc. He made four of 13 three-point shots (30.8 percent) in his first UK season. He claimed to be a better shooter than Obi, who made 41.7 percent of his three-point shots while playing two seasons for Dayton.

Why did Jacob Toppin not shoot better last season?

"A little bit was mental," he said. "Mentally, I wasn't there."

Toppin said he intended to have more of a presence next season, literally as well as figuratively.

"I definitely think I grew, like an inch,"

he said. Last season UK listed him at 6-foot-9, coincidentally the same height listed for Obi.

Calipari took notice, Toppin said.

"I came back and Cal looked at me," the player said. "He's, like, whoa, did you grow?"

Toppin also intends to add bulk. UK listed his weight as 194 pounds. The New York Knicks list Obi Toppin's weight as 220.

"This offseason I plan to, like, gain at least 10 pounds because I need that 10 pounds of muscle," he said. "So, we'll see how that goes."

As for the Kentucky team for next season, Toppin echoed earlier player comments about the players meshing. This process has been helped by the relaxation of restrictions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's definitely different," he said. "Last year we didn't do anything together. I think that was one of the problems."

"And this year, we're already in the (Wildcat Coal) Lodge."

Toppin spoke of a gathering place at the team dorm that includes a ping pong table, pool table and a big screen television.

Toppin conceded that even with COVID-19 receding, a Kentucky team with so many new players will need time to coalesce.

"It's definitely going to take some time for us to build that connection (and) build that trust within one another to play better," he said. "But I think we'll be good. We're all meshing well right now, so as time goes on, as we play more together, we'll get that connection."

Of the newcomers, freshman Daimion Collins has made a positive first impression.

"He plays just like Isaiah (Jackson)," Toppin said. "I don't know if everyone noticed that. . . . He's blocking shots. He dunks the ball. He's going to be a great player for us."

Toppin also all but predicted a noticeable improvement in shooting.

"We have a lot more shooters," he said. "Even the freshmen, they're shooting the ball really well. . . . So it's going to be different. We're going to be able to space the floor more."

Returning to the child's question about Kentucky's best dunker, Toppin smiled as he said he noticed Calipari pause before responding. Toppin saw this as the UK coach flashing his playful sense of humor.

"Everyone knows I'm the best dunker," he said. "He was just messing with me. I know he's messing with me. I know I'm the best dunker, and everyone knows I'm the best dunker."

"So I wasn't really worried about that."

Why Kentucky basketball legends are convinced their friend Chin Coleman will shine at UK

By Jon Hale | Louisville Courier Journal
May 18

When new Kentucky basketball assistant coach Ron "Chin" Coleman was deciding where he would work next season, at least one of his closest friends had a vested interest in the decision.

Former Kentucky star Antoine Walker, the highest draft pick from UK's 1996 national championship squad, has known Coleman for almost 30 years. The two first met as high school stars in Chicago in the early 1990s and speak "almost every day."

So, when Coleman called Walker for advice about the next step in his coaching career amid interest from Kentucky, his former employer Illinois and others, Walker knew he had to shoot straight.

"It was tough because obviously my love is for the school and my love is for him, so the first thing when he called me was, I wanted him to be happy," Walker said. "I wanted him and his wife and his daughter to be happy. I wanted the best for them. He thought this would be a great opportunity. I blessed it. I wanted him to be a part of it."

"I just told him 'Don't get me wrong, the University of Illinois is a great school, but coming to Kentucky is something different. Being a part of Big Blue Nation and the culture and everything at Kentucky is going to be different.'"

A year older than Walker, Coleman graduate from South Shore High School in Chicago in 1992 and enrolled at Weber State. He transferred to Lamar for his second season as Walker, who graduated from Mount Carmel in Chicago, began his college career at Kentucky.

The Boston Celtics drafted Walker with the No. 6 pick in the 1996 NBA Draft. Coleman finished his collegiate career 10th on the Lamar career scoring list in 1997.

Kentucky basketball: To land Orlando Antigua and Chin Coleman from Illinois, Kentucky had to pay big

"Even though he may have not played at the highest level, he could have," Walker said. "He was a big-time high school player in the city of Chicago. He had a very good collegiate career. He played pro for a couple years too. He knows how the game is. He understands it from a coach's perspective as well as a player's perspective."

"...My first 8-9 years in the league, that was one of my workout buddies. That was a guy I played pickup ball with every day. I think his on-the-court development on top of the recruiting makes him a little bit different than most assistant coaches."

Walker's former Kentucky teammate

and fellow Chicago native Nazr Mohammed met Coleman around the time of UK's 1996 championship season. Mohammed, who spent 18 seasons in the NBA and now works in the Oklahoma City Thunder's front office, missed a call from Coleman in the days leading up to Coleman joining John Calipari's staff, so he did not learn the news until he saw it on Instagram.

Mohammed quickly texted a screenshot of the post to Coleman, who confirmed he was joining Big Blue Nation.

"I know how important this is to him as far as what Kentucky means," Mohammed said. "He's been around it through me and Antoine. He knows just being in the game ... the caliber and the history of Kentucky. Getting a chance to add a friend to that inner circle is kind of special to me."

After his playing career ended, Coleman started his coaching career in the high school ranks in Chicago. He coached Chicago-area AAU power Mac Irvin Fire from 2005 to 2011 before jumping to the college ranks as an assistant coach for Tim Miles at Colorado State.

Coleman made stops at Nebraska, Bradley and Illinois-Chicago before moving to Illinois in 2017. There, he worked with former Kentucky assistant Orlando Antigua.

When Calipari decided to shakeup his staff in the wake of a 9-16 2020-21 season, he quickly pursued a reunion with Antigua, a key figure in the program's early success during Calipari's tenure, but did not stop his raid of the Illinois staff there. While Coleman said he and Antigua were not a package deal, he acknowledged Antigua's familiarity with Kentucky was a helpful resource while he weighed multiple offers this offseason.

"I'm truly living a dream," Coleman said. "I've done it from the bottom all the way to the top, literally. Literally, I'm at the pinnacle, I'm at the top of the mountain in terms of being a coach at the University of Kentucky. I needed every step of the way."

The energy and work ethic that spurred Coleman's ascent up the coaching ladder was evident when Walker and Mohammed first met him more than 20 years ago.

Both expressed confidence that the partnership between Coleman and Kentucky will allow his reputation as an elite recruiter to blossom even more, but the friends cautioned that Coleman should not be typecast as a recruiter alone.

"We argue and talk and disagree - we do it every day - about basketball and about talent from every level," Walker said. "So, I know his developmental skills and how he's going to be able to develop a player on the court is getting better and better. I think that's what he's going to separate himself from most guys that come in."

Antigua left Kentucky in 2014 for a head coaching position at South Florida. Walker and Mohammed think Coleman could enjoy a similar rise after studying under Calipari at Kentucky.

Before then, they expect Big Blue Nation to reap the rewards of their friend's varied talents.

"I think he's going to shine," Mohammed said. "...There was nothing I really needed to tell him. He knows it all. I told him, come do what you have to do. It was a rough year this year. Time for you to contribute and help Coach Cal help us have a nice bounce back."