

West Virginia junior guard Isaac McKneely glad to be on Kentucky's radar



by Larry Vaught

Isaac McKneely's junior season won't start until March 1 at the earliest but when it does, his coach says watch that a special player he is.

"He is really a good player. He is about 6-4, 185 now and he is a heck of a shooter. He can shoot the ball great," said Allen Osborne, McKneely's coach at Poca High School in West Virginia. "He can score, drive to the basket, shoot over top of defenders. He's a good passer, a combo guard. He's just the type of kid you want in your program. He's also very humble and hungry to get better."

"He wants to play at the next level. He's long, very athletic. I just think he has a chance to be a very, very special player."

McKneely does not have a Kentucky scholarship offer but he has UK on his final list of eight schools along with Illinois, Indiana, Louisville, North Carolina, Purdue, Virginia and West Virginia. North Carolina is the only other school in his top eight that has not offered a scholarship.

He's not a top 25 player nationally in the 2022 class but is considered a top 60 player by most recruiting analysts. Osborne has no doubt he can succeed at a high level. He was the coach at Poca before he retired and had been coaching at the University of Charleston. His successor at Poca left and when he was asked to come back — the gymnasium there is named for him — and said he would for a year. This is now year three for him back as Poca's head coach.

"He was our point guard my first season back when he was a freshman," Osborne said. "They had won five games the years before. We won 18 and he was a big part of that. We got to state. If our season had not got cut short last year, he would already be over 1,000 points. He's that good."

McKneely was a 6-2, 150-pound sophomore. Now he weighs around 180 pounds and his coach says getting bigger and stronger has not impacted his "good feet" on the court.

"We have really focused on his defense," Osborne said. "I think he can be a very good defender. We want him to be as good defensively as he is offensively. He has really concentrated on that."

McKneely is also learning to play more without the ball. His coach says in middle school the ball was always in his hands but he's working to be a complete player who can off screens to score, too.

"We are actually going to try and get him to shoot the ball more. He's a good teammate, but for us this year we need him to shoot more," Osborne said. "He can handle the ball. He's a really good passer and shooter. But he's also a very unselfish player and a great teammate."

"He's very humble. He never talks about getting recruited. We have about 500 kids in school and a nice little community. His recruitment is a big deal but he's not going to

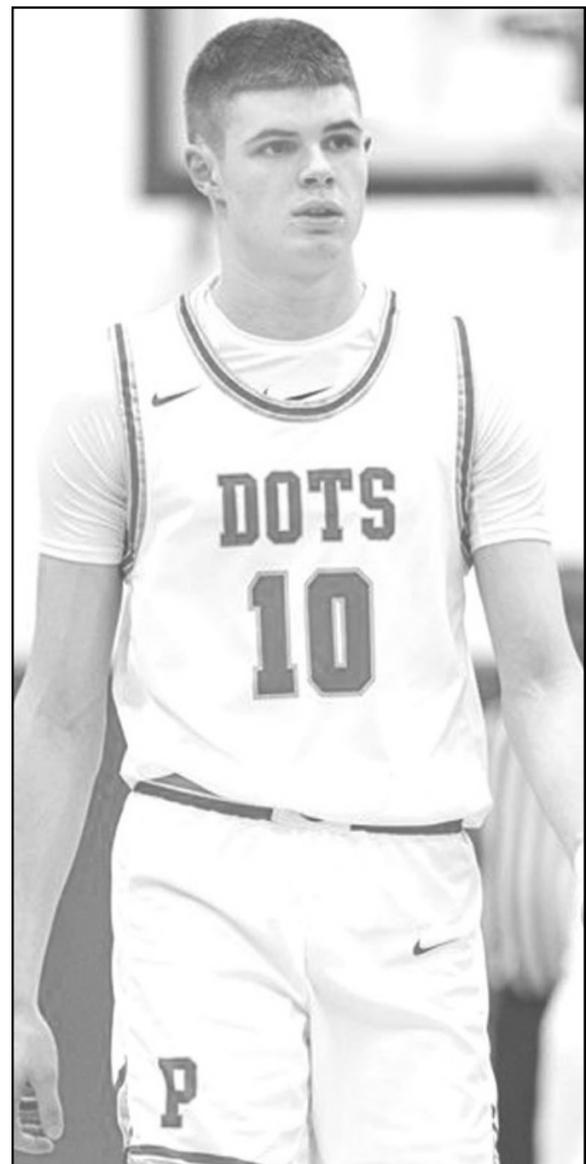
brag or act conceited. He never says anything to me about recruiting. I have to ask him who he has talked to. He just takes it all in stride."

Calipari called Osborne several months ago to tell the coach he wanted to see McKneely play this year before they offered a scholarship since they could not see him play last summer.

"Calipari said they would be keeping tabs on him. A couple of Kentucky assistants have talked with the family. They have let him know they are very interested. Calipari was very upfront and honest about all this," Osborne said.

How much interest does McKneely have in Kentucky?

"He does not say a lot but he is interested. The thing about Kentucky is that of all the schools on his list, Kentucky is closer to home than anybody," Osborne said. "It's only about 2 1/2 hours from here to Lexington and that's a big factor because his mom and dad want to watch him play in college. They are a very close family and that will be a big factor in his decision."



Isaac McKneely's coach believes he has skills to be both an elite offensive and defensive player. McKneely has UK on his final list of eight schools. (Chuck Roberts Photo)

Rhyné Howard is still the best player in women's college basketball



Kentucky does not have to depend on Rhyné Howard as much this year but coach Kyra Elzy says she is still the nation's best player and proved that at Mississippi State. (Vicky Graff Photo)

Kentucky had to rely so much on Rhyné Howard last year to win, especially in the biggest games.

This year coach Kyra Elzy has a lot more options and depth at Kentucky. Howard, a preseason All-American, has not had to carry as much of the load for UK to win. However, Elzy says not to doubt what Howard means to the team or how good the junior is.

"Let's make no mistake about it, Rhyné Howard is still the best player in women's college basketball, and the things that make Rhyné that is that she is so versatile," Elzy said. "She can score on all three levels, but you look at the stat sheet and she might have 10 or 12 rebounds, she might have eight or 10 assists, or eight or 10 steals. She can do anything on the court."

"You have to look at her stat line across the board. Scoring wise, she is still scoring in double digits, but you don't need her to score as much because now you have Blair Green who is shooting the

ball well, Dre'una Edwards who is scoring on the inside. You have Chasity Patterson scoring. We're more balanced scoring this year."

"But Rhyné is playing well. We will continue to challenge her to be the best version of herself, and right now, she wants to make sure this team is winning, whatever that looks like."

All that was said before Kentucky went to No. 12 Mississippi State and won 92-86 Sunday behind a sensational game by Howard. She got in early foul trouble and had only four points at halftime and eight after three quarters but finished with 33 points on 10-for-19 shooting (4-for-6 from 3) from the field and 9-for-10 at the foul line. She added 10 rebounds, six assists, one block and one steal in 37 minutes — and never picked up another foul after getting two in the first five minutes.

"The second half they just started going to me more and my teammates kept looking to me to make plays and make plays for them,"

Howard said. "I kept hitting and I just kept taking them (shots)."

Elzy said there was no doubt the Mississippi State win proved why Howard is the nation's best player in case anyone had any doubts.

"She can take over at any time. She is so gifted but also unselfish," Elzy said. "She has a high basketball IQ and is a great passer. When it is time to take over (a game), she just gives me that look. We just have that connection. When it is time to make big plays we put the ball in her hands and let her do what she does best."

Perhaps the best news for Kentucky is that Howard has already decided she will be back at UK next year and not in the WNBA where Elzy knows she will be a first-round pick.

"Luckily for Big Blue Nation it will not be next year (when she is a first-round pick) because she is not going to enter the draft early," Elzy said. "When it is her time, she will be a No. 1 pick."

Duffy's Collegiate Career Ends

Max Duffy's collegiate career ended in the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl with him somehow avoiding getting a punt blocked when it looked like he had no chance to avoid the North Carolina State rush. He also put two punts inside the 20-yard line.

It was a fitting end to a career that has been nothing short of remarkable.

In 33 career games, Duffy punted 146 times and averaged 46.2 yards per kick. He put 67 punts inside the 20-yard line with only seven touchbacks. He had 49 punts of 50 yards or more and did not have a kick blocked in three years. He won the Ray Guy Award as the nation's top punter in 2019 when he averaged 48.1 yards per punt. This year he averaged 45.8 yards per attempt.

"I think winning the Ray Guy Award a year ago really gave him a lot of recognition that he deserved. That's a major award, the biggest award he could win for himself, along with being an All-American, so I think it's been

a really good experience for all of us," Kentucky coach Mark Stoops said.

"Max and I have a really good relationship. I think he thoroughly enjoyed his time here and I'm grateful for him, the job that he did for us. We're going to miss him but he did a good job helping us recruit another Aussie and hopefully we'll keep that tradition going."

Stoops said avoiding the block in his final game was a "big-time play" by the All-American punter.

"It just goes to show you how savvy he is and how talented he is. Definitely we're grateful for his background of Aussie football right there on that play because to have the confidence in that to elude the rush and then punt it the way he did," Stoops said.

"He's just a talented guy. He really is. He's got more tricks up his sleeve too. I wish we had him for more years, but we're grateful for him bringing in another Aussie."

Quotes of the Week

Quote of the Week: "I can't single out anybody. Everybody didn't back down. All 11 guys, we did what we could, we tried to keep playing to make sure ... that in the back of our mind we refused to lose the game," linebacker Jamin Davis, who had 13 tackles and one interception, on UK's defense in the 23-21 Gator Bowl win.

Quote of the Week 2: "That boy Dontaie Allen went nuclear dropping them 3's from everywhere. Good stuff brodie, way to own the moment and help get that W. Ditto for my boy Dev Askew, way to play brodie, made plays all game," Kentucky basketball commit Skyy Clark on Twitter after Allen hit seven 3-pointers in the double overtime win at Mississippi State.

Quote of the Week 3: "We were roommates at every bowl game that I had when he was with UK. But I'll just say, he's the loudest snorer I've ever seen in my life. Like you would wake up in the middle of the night and not be able to go back to sleep because his snoring was so loud," UK defensive lineman Josh Paschal on former UK teammate Josh Allen, who now plays in the NFL for Jacksonville.

Sounds like a lot of fun next year

Sounds like it is going to be a lot of fun having Liam Coen and Brad White, both Rhode Island natives, as coordinators for Mark Stoops next season.

Coen has been with the Los Angeles Rams but knows about White, who played at Bishop Hendricken High School, a rival high school to Coen's LaSalle Academy in Providence, R.I.

Coen told the Berkshire Eagle he thought there were only three or four coaches from Rhode Island in the NFL or college football. Now two of them will be coordinators at the same SEC school.

"Actually it's pretty funny. Brad and I don't really know each other personally. I remember what jersey numbers Brad White wore (in high school). I think I was an eighth grader when he was a senior at Bishop Hendricken. I just always respected him as a player," Coen told the Rhode Island newspaper.

White says the two of them are a bit alike. Both coached in college before going to the NFL and then coming back to college.

"It's not like he never coached at this level. Not much needed in that regard. Just letting him know we are excited to have him here and make sure he knows his high school school was second to mine (in Rhode Island)," White said when asked what advice he might give Coen.

Coen got a boost after UK's bowl win when leading receiver Josh Ali announced he was going to come back to play an extra year as allowed by the NCAA because of the pandemic. Ali had 53 catches for 480 yards and one touchdown. He said a main reason he was coming back was to "enhance" his resume playing for Coen.

Tight end Justin Rigg also said he would come back for another season to give Coen another experienced threat in the passing game.