

Calipari's "Next" Final Four Team



Larry Vaught

In just about two weeks Kentucky coach John Calipari will show off his next team that he hopes can once again be a Final Four/national championship contender.

But think back to a year ago at this time. Sure, everyone thought the Wildcats would be good. Really good. They were, boo.

Yet even those lofty pre-season expectations did not do justice to then freshman point guard Tyler Ulis. The 5-9 dynamo from Chicago was "only" ranked 20th in the 2014 recruiting class and many wondered how a point guard that small would do, especially in Calipari's point guard driven system. However, Ulis didn't need long to erase any doubts anyone had about his ability.

He impressed teammates with his toughness, passing and 3-point shooting. He impressed UK coaches with his poise and ability to run the offense. He impressed fans with his non-stop energy and passion.

Now going into this season some are speculating that Ulis could be the best point guard in the nation. Not in the SEC, but best in the nation. On top of that, Calipari is saying he thinks Ulis will be in the NBA next year. While that could be aimed at helping recruiting, no one can dismiss that notion after Ulis averaged 5.6 points and 3.8 assists per game while shooting 80.8 percent at the foul line, 42.9 percent from 3-point range and 40.6 percent overall.

So what do some basketball experts think about Ulis with the official start of practice just about two weeks away.

"I think Tyler Ulis is a special player. He has a terrific understanding of how to run a team, he is an excellent handler and passer and he can knock down open shots," said ESPN analyst Jay Bilas. "The ball moves when he is running the show. And, he is an excellent pressure defender at the point of attack. I have no doubt Ulis will play in the NBA. The only question is when."

Sporting News columnist Mike DeCourcy was one of a few sold on Ulis' ability before he got to Kentucky. Watching Ulis give out 135 assists and finish the season without making a turnover in the final four NCAA

Tournament games did not surprise DeCourcy.

"I'm a huge believer in Tyler Ulis, and I've got the clips to prove it. If the question is 'could he be the best' in the country, I'd have to say something like that is possible. But he's not now, and I don't see it as likely. If he weren't a defensive liability in some situations, Calipari would have used him down the stretch of the Wisconsin game and the Wildcats might have another title," DeCourcy said. "But his lack of size is problematic against someone like Bronson Koenig, and Cal had to make a choice."

"If we were talking about Fred Van Vleet or Kris Dunn, that wouldn't be an issue. They're the two best pure points in college hoops, and North Carolina's Marcus Paige is in the discussion if he's to be a point guard."

"Whether Tyler is in the NBA next year is up to him and Cal. I don't think Tyler will be a first-round pick after this year, next year or the year after. So how much college hoops he plays is dependent on how much he wants to play, and how successful he is as he progresses. I do think he'll have an outstanding sophomore season."

Another ESPN analyst, Dick Vitale, says he wants to evaluate results as the season progresses before declaring Ulis the best or NBA ready.

"There are a lot of very talented point guards all across America. It is too early to make a rash statement. Let's see how he does with the increased minutes on the court," Vitale said.

Kentucky Radio Network analyst Mike Pratt, a former UK All-American, believes Ulis could be the best point guard and be in the NBA next year. But he says neither is a given.

"He will be Cal on the floor. His experience last year allows him to be that," Pratt said. "It'll be interesting to see how opponents play him on defense, but he can be special in the transition game."

Blue Ribbon Basketball Yearbook has Kentucky ranked No. 1 in its pre-season poll. Count him as a big believer in Ulis.

"I think he's a great player. He runs the show, doesn't make many unforced errors, and if you back off him, you're dead, because he's going to nail a 3," Dortch said. "Whether he heads for the NBA next year, I'm not sure. People might point to his (lack of) size, but he's thrived at every level he's played in spite of that. The NBA is the best level in the world, of course, but a guy who can make 3's and values possessions can make a living up there, regardless of his size."

Anyone who knows Ken-

tucky quarterback Patrick Towles has to be proud — and probably not surprised — that the junior bounced back from a game against Florida that had many calling for him to lose playing time to turn in probably his best collegiate performance in last week's 21-13 win over Missouri.

He completed 14 of his first 15 passes for 120 yards and also scored a touchdown. He finished the game 22 of 27 passing for 249 yards and two scores. He became the first UK quarterback since Andre Woodson in 2007 to throw for at least two scores and rush for a score in the same game.

Towles is not one to gloat. Never was when he was a prep standout at Highlands and has never been that way at Kentucky.

So let offensive coordinator Shannon Dawson do the bragging on Towles. He noted that Towles has played under three offensive coordinators — Randy Sanders (who often didn't talk to Towles), Neal Brown and Dawson.

"It just takes time. I knew eventually it would click. I didn't know if it would click tonight or not. Obviously he played better," Dawson said after the win. "I told him (after the Florida game) that it's not the critic who counts. It's the man in the arena. You've got to block all that stuff out. So let it motivate you; let it do whatever, but you've got to consider sources and believe in yourself, trust in yourself and when negative things happen, you've got to put it behind you and you've got



Tyler Ulis, right, gives Kentucky a proven point guard to lead this year's team along with, from left to right, Dominique Hawkins, Alex Poythress and Marcus Lee.

(UK photo day with Ulis by Vicky Graff) Daniel is another top 100 players and one of the top-ranked outside linebackers.

Even more important is that they are two of the vocal leaders of the class that currently has 22 members and is ranked in the top 20 nationally.

Finally, thanks for giving me the chance to share University of Kentucky stories/information with you weekly. If you have a comment, suggestion or criticism, contact me at larryvau@gmail.com or on Twitter at @vaughtsviews. The only thing I have enjoyed more than covering Kentucky football and basketball for over 40 years is interacting with UK fans during that same time frame.

as the game ended, he went to the stands to find his parents. He gave his mom, Amy, a kiss, and hugged his father, Terry. How can you not love a player like that?

The win over Missouri also had a more lasting impact on recruiting.

In-state stars Drake Jackson of Woodford County and Kash Daniel of Paintsville, my frontrunner for Mr. Football honors, announced on Twitter that they had signed financial agreements with Kentucky so that they can enroll in college in January and go through spring practice.

Jackson is ranked as the nation's No. 2 offensive center and a top 100 player in most recruiting services.

Bob Watkins' Sports In Kentucky

Patrick Towles, more in-the-saddle, poised, more U.S. Grant-like (without the cigar of course)



Bob Watkins

Kentucky fans saw it, and those who care about these things, saw it too. A growth spurt. Patrick Towles' face was matter-of-fact after Missouri had been sent packing last week.

UK's quarterback had done poorly against Florida and taken a beating too. Wounded after-game talkers had begun the fickle buzz about replacing him.

Towles' response brought to mind a Ulysses S. Grant at Shiloh Church story. April 1862, his army had taken a fearful beating on a Sunday. That evening Grant sat at his tent puffing a cigar, said, "... whup 'em tomorrow though." On a Monday, the Yankees did precisely that.

Patrick Towles shouldered his part-of-blame from the Florida disappointment, weathered Monday Morning critics and kept quiet about (Cat) calls to replace him. By Friday maybe he said in his pillow, "... whup 'em tomorrow though."

Early on unbeaten Mizou was having its way with Kentucky again. Then Towles began to glow a bit, adjusted himself behind a less than perfect offensive line trying hard to man-up along its own skirmish lines.

Towles got comfortable

using his feet and head. In spite of a sack or two, he kept his eyes up for opportunity and it came on a first-and-29. And, in the mix somewhere he remembered at 6-5, 240-something, I'm a load! (See replay of 14-yard scramble for a second quarter touchdown.)

With a rekindled flicker of momentum and backed by a defense coming of age also, Towles settled in, became precise, then immaculate, a field general. Completed 22 of 27 passes, two touchdowns, no interceptions and established a rhythm with the large fellows up front. Towles' revival could/should pivot Kentucky to more (SEC) success. Auburn comes to town a beleaguered bunch that failed to score zero touchdowns last week.

Post game, raves and buzz rose again for Towles. He earned them. Then, during an interview he exhibited another skill in come-of-age generalship. He skipped the tiresome and negative "... I had to prove everybody wrong," recognizing maybe it's baloney nobody believes anyway.

Coach Mark Stoops bottom lined the accolades. "I'm pretty stingy with game balls," he said. "but I think he deserved one tonight, so I gave him a game ball."

"I thought he played a really good game and made some really good plays with his feet and was aggressive down the stretch."

Towles credited teammates, took his bows and headed to the house looking more in-the-saddle, more poised, more U.S. Grant-like ... without the cigar of course.

HOFS & STATUE DEPT.

For those not kept on sports Halls of Fame and

statues, add my name. Both are vastly overrated, too political and too many inductees are louts and frauds.

However, that Greg Page, Nate Northington, Wilbur Hackett and Houston Hogg will be memorialized as statue figures in front of Commonwealth Stadium at University of Kentucky is late, but outstanding.

Football pioneers at Kentucky in the Southeastern Conference, they are a collective symbol of courage and dignity. Every time fans see their likeness at the stadium, ideally we will be reminded of ...

√ Their courage as an example to all who pass by.

√ And more, I think, they are example of how millions of Americans try hard to advance inclusion and defeat bigotry.

The UK official(s) who pushed the idea to fruition ought get a pay hike.

Northington, Page and Hogg were solid SEC athletes. Hackett, team captain in 1969 and an outstanding linebacker, was always a personal favorite.

CRANK IT UP TIME

Western Kentucky (4-1) and Louisville (1-3) will be in crank-it-up mode this week with important conference road games.

Western foe Rice (2-2) was smashed by Texas and Baylor by an aggregate 112 points which could mean another passing show carnival for Brandon Dougherty's Hilltoppers Saturday afternoon in Houston. In a C-USA league game vital for bowl game reasons, this could be a defining game for WKU's defense.

Louisville against North Carolina State (4-0) looks like tough sledding in Raleigh. In what could be a scoring-rich environment, Uofl's defense will face a

Wolfpack that has steam-rolled opponents 45, 39, 38 and 63 points in games so far.

Both games have entertainment value of 9-something on scale of 10.

FORBES BEST COLLEGES

A decade-or-so ago a University of Kentucky president declared his goal was to see UK ranked among USA's Top 20 institutions academically.

For those who wonder how that's gone, and where our state's institutions of higher learning stand in Forbes Magazine's latest rankings.

Centre College 89th; Transylvania 196; Asbury University 298; Berea College 305; University of Kentucky 319; Georgetown 375; Bellarmine 462; Louisville 503; Murray State 558; Western Kentucky 584; Northern Kentucky 626 and Eastern Kentucky 637.

CORRECTION

In this space last week I referred to Maryland as a member of the ACC. Beginning this academic year Maryland is now in the Big Ten.

PARTING SHOT

Much eulogized last week, Lawrence Peter Berra was certainly an American Everyman.

A remark attributed to Yogi, I liked best: "So, I'm ugly. So what? I never saw anyone hit with his face."

My favorite image of Berra was his retreat toward the left field wall at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh in October, 1960. Yogi was last man to see Bill Mazeroski's World Series winning home run.

And so it goes. You can reach me at <bob.Watkins24@aol.com



A Veterans Benefits Field Representative will be at the National Guard Armory, 335 Cow Creek Road, Ravenna, on Thursday, October 1st and normally the first Thursday of each month. The hours are 1:30 p.m. until 3:30 p.m.

Veterans and their dependants will receive assistance filing for Federal and state veterans benefits. This service is provided free of charge by the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs. To apply, veterans need to furnish copies of pertinent documentation to verify eligibility. For further information, please call toll free within Kentucky, 1-866-376-0308, to speak with a Veterans Benefits Field Representative.

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