

Five-year wait is over -- Wildcats get to prove loyal fan base



by Larry Vaught

For five years Kentuckian John Showalter has been waiting for a chance to let those on the Taxslayer Bowl committee with him know what a loyal fan base the Wildcats have.

Finally this year he got his chance.

"I was making sure everyone here understood that Kentucky would be a great option for our bowl game," Showalter, a Boyle County High School graduate, said. "I was always reminding everyone that when Kentucky got to be good enough, we need to consider Kentucky. A lot of them just did not recognize the passion Kentucky fans have for football, too."

Kentucky fans will get to prove that now as UK will meet Georgia Tech in the Taxslayer Bowl in Jacksonville Dec. 31 at 11 a.m. It will be UK's first bowl appearance since 2010.

He said three keys for the bowl selection committee are heads in the bed, ticket sales and TV viewership. Kentucky fans should account for plenty of hotel rooms and tickets. Georgia Tech should also have a strong fan base. Both teams are on an uptick -- UK went 7-3 in its last 10 games and Georgia Tech 5-1 in its final six -- and have potent offenses that could make for an entertaining game.

"Play on the field gets you in position for a bowl but heads in the bed and ticket sales are a big, big thing," Showalter, a media account manager with Cox Media in Jacksonville, said. He said the stadium where the Jacksonville Jaguars play is over 20 years old but has recently been totally renovated and even has two swimming pools in the north end zone.

"We also have the two largest video boards in the

world and they are so big that they can cause a glare to be in a receiver's eyes when he looks for the ball," Showalter said.

For fans, there are three beaches in the area along with top golf courses. There will be a UK pep rally Dec. 30 at 6 p.m. at Jacksonville Landing and a Jacksonville Light Boat Parade Dec. 30 from 7-9 p.m. at Jacksonville Landing. There's also the Vystar 5K Run Dec. 30 at 2 p.m. in downtown Jacksonville.

After the game there is a free concert in downtown Jacksonville featuring iCounty Music Association Duo of the Year Brothers Osborne along with other singers.

"A lot of activities are planned and more will be added," Showalter said. "The local UK alumni club is working with the club in Lexington to get some things organized."

"It's only about an 11-hour drive (from Lexington) and for the game, weather and all Jacksonville has to do, I think it is going to be great for UK fans and I know I can't wait for the game to get here."

Kentucky athletics director Mitch Barnhart vowed to get the football team the "best bowl possible" after its upset of Louisville to close the regular season and did by landing a spot in Florida on New Year's Eve.

"Getting to Jacksonville resonates with kids. They got excited when we just talked about the possibility of Jacksonville," Barnhart said. "Obviously it is a little further away in terms of distance but we have an incredible fan base in Atlanta. There are a lot that come to the SEC tourney and we call it Atlanta for basketball."

"We have a large Georgia alumni base. A large group of Kentucky fans go to Florida for the winter. And a lot of folks waiting for the opportunity here and are very excited about heading that way."

"I would say there would be a significant following of Kentucky blue and white. Our fan base is phenomenal. They have been great to us and specifically our football program. We are looking forward to having them with us and are encouraging people to jump on board and enjoy the journey with us."



Mark Stoops and his players were honored during halftime of the UK-UCLA game last week and Stoops says they could not be happier to be playing Georgia Tech in the Taxslayer Bowl Dec. 31 in Jacksonville. (Vicky Graff Photo)

Monk turns into a great defender

by Larry Vaught

Probably Malik Monk did not even totally believe Kentucky coach John Calipari when he told him that once he got to UK, he would develop into a great defender after being known primarily as a scorer during his Arkansas high school career.

"Now you look at Malik Monk guarding. And so you're all talking about his scoring, but look at what he's doing defensively. This kind is light on his feet, he can move, he can block, he's long, he's active. Quick mind," Calipari said. "He just picks up stuff, real quick. Quick mind, which is probably the most underrated thing. People don't realize that's how you get steals, blocks. It's like a baseball player that sees the baseball coming slower. That's how his mind works."

Monk can also run. So can most of his teammates and that has given Calipari a team most cannot match for overall team speed.

"We're fast and we're quick," Calipari said. "It's hard for me to remember

year to year. In 2010, we were really fast. In 2012, we were fast. You had to run, but that was Michael (Kidd-Gilchrist), Terrence Jones, Anthony Davis, Doron Lamb. We flew. Darius Miller. I mean, we flew up and down that court. Marquis Teague. But this team is really fast, too. Wow. Like, if you don't get back, you better get back."

Still, the Cats learned a hard lesson in Saturday's loss to UCLA -- they cannot outrun every team, especially one as skilled shooting the ball as the Bruins. Monk had 24 points, but Calipari did not like the way he settled for perimeter shots and did not go inside to get fouled.

"I was just trying to score. That probably happened," Monk said. "I've just gotta attack more. Stop settling for a lot of jumpers and just attack."

"I don't care about missing shots. It's just defense. We know we're going to miss a lot of shots, but we're still going to have opportunities to score. Just the defense -- we gotta focus on our defense."



Malik Monk has learned to improve his defense at UK but after losing to UCLA he knows that his defense -- and the team's defense -- has to get better. (Vicky Graff Photo)

Not quite ready for the "Big Blue Crush"

by Larry Vaught

Shai Alexander knew there would be a lot of Kentucky basketball fans at the Marshall County Hoop Fest who would want to see him play since he had signed with coach John Calipari's team in November.

However, the point guard from Hamilton Heights (Chattanooga) was still not quite ready for the Big Blue crush.

He was 8-for-19 from the field and had 21 points, six rebounds and two assists in a loss last weekend to Prolific Prep (Calif.) that featured Duke signee Gary Trent Jr. and Xavier signee Paul Scruggs in its backcourt.

Alexander was asked to sign autographs by young fans before he even got on the court. After the game, he signed autographs outside the locker room and again in the concourse. He even had young fans asking him to sign their shoes.

"There's a lot of Kentucky basketball fans. I kind of thought I knew that, but I found out even more after I signed with Kentucky," the 6-5 Alexander said.

Alexander should be an easy fit into Calipari's system. He's a pass-first player who seldom makes bad decisions or turnovers. He's thin, but does not shy away

from contact and got to the basket often even against Trent and Scruggs, two physically mature players who are both five-star recruits.

Alexander came to Chattanooga from Ontario two years ago to face better daily competition. He initially committed to Florida as a junior but later changed his mind and UK quickly came after him.

Kentucky also signed Philadelphia's Quade Green, considered the nation's best senior point guard by most recruiting analysts, in November. That doesn't worry Alexander.

"Point guard is my natural position, but Quade is a great player and special talent," Alexander said. "He can pass it, score it. He is great. I have played against him a little bit and I am glad we will be together."

Alexander figures Calipari made it work two years ago with Tyler Ulis and Jamal Murray playing in the same backcourt and is doing it this year with Malik Monk and De'Aaron Fox.

"We will be fun to watch and we will get after it," Alexander said. "Coach said having multiple ballhandlers makes it easier. He showed me how we could play together and fit well."

He's not worried about what other guards UK



Kentucky signee Shai Alexander was so popular at the Marshall County Hoop Fest that young fans even came into the hospitality room wanting his autograph. (Larry Vaught Photo)

might recruit to fill out next year's roster with Dominique Hawkins and Mychal Mulder graduating and Fox, Monk and Isaiah Briscoe likely to leave for the NBA.

"I am okay with what he (Calipari) does. I am not

Morris, stronger, more explosive

by Larry Vaught

Former Bell County standout Maci Morris knew she would have to do a lot more for the Kentucky basketball team this year -- and she has.

"She is a year older, much stronger, much more explosive, more athletic, much better overall," coach Matthew Mitchell said. "She showed up on campus as a baller player. A lot of people kind of pegged her as a shooter -- and she is a basketball player."

"She can put it on the floor,

she can shoot the mid-range, she can make the 3. But she is just a year older, stronger and obviously she's been here a year so she knows everything a little bit better. I'm excited and she's just going to continue to get better. You can just see the great basketball she is playing and will play for the next two and three-quarter seasons here at Kentucky. She's a good one."

She had 10 points and played 42 minutes in Sunday's overtime loss at No. 7 Louisville.

A&M Signee Looks Forward to Playing Fox

by Larry Vaught

After Kentucky freshman De'Aaron Fox recorded only the second triple-double in UK men's basketball history, one of many to congratulate him on Twitter was Sunrise Christian Academy senior Isaiah Jasey, a Texas A&M signee.

Like Fox, he's originally from Texas even though he's now at prep school in Kansas.

"I actually played on his AAU team two years ago. He is one of my close friends," Jasey said after playing in the Marshall County Hoop Fest in Benton. "It is incredible what he has done. I knew he would be real good. He is athletic and gets down the floor so well."

"He is a real genuine person, too. Most people would take the hype and take it to their head. But he is genuine and a good person and what people like about him the most. He's really nice."

What about his hair?
"I remember high school, he always had the hair going

on. It's his character. He enjoys the hair but he ran our team and was a great leader, so we couldn't say much," Jasey said.

Jasey is also familiar with Kentucky signee P.J. Washington, a power forward from Las Vegas.

"I have played against him since eighth grade. All I can say is that I can't wait to play him in the SEC. It will be a tough matchup but we will go back at it," Jasey said.

"Our games are similar. We get up and down the floor, block shots, rebound. We do things that other people don't always do. We do the hard stuff that helps teams win. We have knocked heads plenty of times. Always a rivalry there and I am sure that won't go away in college."

Jasey knows the success Kentucky basketball has had. He sees the recruits Calipari brings in annually.

"We are just coming. I see their success. I am getting ready to face that next year. We'll be ready is all I can say," Jasey said.