

How Mark Pope plans to recruit elite high school basketball talent at Kentucky

By KYLE TUCKER

The Athletic

Westfield, Ind., a Mark Pope looked like a new student at school who was eager to impress both the cool kids and the teacher. He wore all the big brand names: blue Kentucky quarter-snip, white Nike kicks and a black Louis Vuitton backpack, in which he concealed the nerdier stuff. He certainly did his homework. After sliding into a court-side seat at last week's Nike EYBL recruiting event, Pope pulled out his giant black binder stuffed full of lists and charts and schedules and notes. Inside, he had analytics reports on all the high school players he planned to recruit over the weekend, the NCAA's first live evaluation period since Pope took over as head coach of his alma mater.

This was an important checkpoint.

It didn't take long for Pope to demonstrate his mastery of the transfer portal, from which he landed eight players in his first month on the job. And he's not done there, as coveted North Florida transfer guard Chaz Lanier took an official visit to Lexington on Monday. What remains to be seen, however, is how Pope will fare in recruiting elite prep players, upon which predecessor John Calipari gorged himself for the last decade and a half. Pope wasn't a serious suitor of five-star prospects in his first nine seasons as a head coach at Utah Valley and BYU, but now he's suddenly splashing around in the deep end of the talent pool. Last weekend provided the first glimpses at how well he can swim in those waters. It also created some vivid reminders of what a wild offseason this has been.

During one game, Pope sat a few feet away from and shared several laughs with Calipari, now wearing Arkansas gear, while Baylor coach Scott Drew and Connecticut coach Dan Hurley stood nearby. Drew was Kentucky athletic director Mitch Barnhart's first choice to replace Calipari, while Hurley was some of the biggest boosters' top candidate, but neither was willing to leave a place they'd already won a national championship. Now Pope is competing with all three of those title-winning coaches — and many others — for talent. So what's his approach?

"We're just out here recruiting the best players we can get, and the best player you can get at Kentucky are the best players," Pope told The Athletic on Saturday at the EYBL event outside Indianapolis. "I'm used to working with relatively limited talent, and Kentucky has a relatively limited pool also. It's just a little different kind of pool. The guys who belong at Kentucky are the very best players in all of college basketball, so those are the guys we're chasing. And then from that group, we're chasing guys that really fit us, the way we're attacking the game and the way we're playing."

Pope vowed at his introductory press conference that Kentucky was not going to stop landing McDonald's All-Americans



Former BYU men's basketball coach Mark Pope holds up his old playing jersey to fans and media after being named Kentucky's head coach on April 14 in Lexington, Ky.

just because Calipari called the Hogs. The players Pope and his staff watched last weekend — at least seven top-five recruits in the 2025 and 2026 classes, plus several more five-stars on both the Nike and Adidas circuits — suggest he's serious about that promise. But Pope also cares about continuity and player development, and he has a plan for recruiting a more diverse mix of prospects than Calipari typically did.

That plan is in the giant binder, part of an ever-evolving sorting system.

"It's a balance. We're actually tiering kids," Pope said. "The kids we think are one-and-done that we really want to try and grab, another tier of guys we think can come in as freshmen, and be in the rotation as freshmen, and then a tier of guys you say, 'Man, I'm telling you, that kid is going to come add something to our program as a freshman, even if he's not in the rotation, and then he's going to win us the biggest games in college basketball as a junior or senior.' So we do our best to tier guys and then go hunting and be super deliberate about the guys in each of those pools that we recruit really hard."

One player Pope seemed smitten with on the Nike circuit was 6-foot-5, 210-pound forward Youssouf Yessoufou, who ranks in the top five in the EYBL in points (23.0) and rebounds (7.5) per game. He's a five-star, top-25 prospect in the 2025 class, and Pope has already made contact.

"He loves my energy, says I've got the killer instinct, and he's a fan of my game," Yessoufou said. "I love the way he talked to me. I feel like he's the type of coach who will show me what I need to improve on the most and push me to be really good. When we talk on the phone, he has a great energy, and coaches like that bring out the best version of yourself."

Yessoufou is also a good reminder that, while Calipari's reputation

for churning out pros is a significant factor in recruiting top talent, Kentucky's brand is also still fairly strong on its own.

"That was my dream school when I came here to the United States," said Yessoufou, who is from West Africa. But did the coaching change alter that dream? "Definitely no. Coach Pope played there, he played in the NBA and he's really good coach. He's one of the things I love about Kentucky."

Point guard Brandon McCoy, arguably the top prospect in 2026, said he wrote a goal down and tucked it to the wall of his childhood bedroom: earn scholarship offers from Kentucky and Duke. He hadn't talked to Pope yet, "but I look forward to meeting him."

Jasper Johnson, the No. 11 player in the Class of 2025, per the 247Sports Composite, got a phone call from Pope last Thursday night. The Cats' new coach told him he'd be watching his EYBL games over the weekend, and Johnson grinned when he mentioned it's hard to miss a 6-foot-10 coach in a bright blue shirt seated directly under the basket, as Pope was Saturday.

Johnson represents the best of both worlds in Pope's approach to roster-building: a homegrown prospect who grew up rooting for Kentucky — his father, Dennis, was a football star there in the Tim Cook era — and a future McDonald's All-American.

"Kentucky has always been a school I look up to," Johnson said. "I know I've been busy building their roster, but how that portal is over, they're thinking more about recruiting and I've been learning more about Coach Pope. His offense is really good for guards, the way they shoot 3s and they're really creative, and he's telling me I'm one of the few high school players he wants. He doesn't want to sign as many high school guys as they have in the past, because you need some older players, some portal guys, so him believing

in me that way feels good."

Johnson said he planned to take another visit to Kentucky's campus this summer to spend time around the new staff and "build our bond."

Those relationships matter a lot in recruiting, and it's one reason Pope's assistant coaching hires were so important. In Alvin Brooks III, an area recruiter at Baylor, and Jason Hart, a former NBA player and most recently head coach of the G League Ignite, Pope landed two men with pre-existing ties to and status with elite talent. Hudson Greer and Shelton Anderson, two top-50 recruits from Texas who were among the standouts on the Nike circuit last weekend, were recruited by Brooks at Baylor — and now he's extolling to them the virtues of Kentucky.

Jason Johnson and AJ Dybantsa, the No. 1 player in the 2025 class, were among the players Hart had recruited to the now-defunct Ignite. "He's a good guy. I like him a lot," Dybantsa's father, Ace, said. Pope formally offered Dybantsa a scholarship two weeks ago and told him he's "just trying to keep up the brand after Cal leaving." Landing a talent like that would help, and Hart gives UK a chance. Ignite was a pro option that was not bound by NCAA rules about how and when you can contact high school players and their families.

"He had that special access to a lot of players in a different way than the rest of us do," Pope said. "And you're not going to meet a better person in the world than Jason Hart. He's got an energy that's contagious, and he's really smart and he could spend all day every day in the gym because of how much he loves the game."

Nearing the 10th hour of a 12-hour day of nonstop grassroots basketball Saturday, Hart sat alone in the bleachers with no notes or rosters in front of him for a change. The matchup did not appear to include any of the players Kentucky was in the building to see or be

seen by. That's because one of his habits at events like this is to pick a couple of games for a blind viewing, to watch with fresh eyes and no preconceived notions about who the stars are supposed to be. Just see who jumps out. If you aren't already recruiting that guy, why not?

"I think that's the DNA of my whole staff, actually," Pope said of such thoroughness. He called Brooks "one of the elite recruiters in all of college basketball, because he builds these super, super deep, meaningful relationships with guys."

Pope's third on-the-road recruiter, Cody Fugger, brings a different perspective to the process. He worked for Pope at Utah Valley and BYU and before that at Utah State, UC Riverside and Louisiana Tech. Fugger spent Friday and Saturday at the Adidas circuit stop in Bryan, Texas, seeing top-40, in-state prospect Malachi Moreno and a handful of five-stars, including No. 3 Darryn Peterson, a Calipari target at UK whom Pope has already re-offered. With the help of a private jet, Fugger then traded places with Pope and Hart on Sunday, joining Brooks at Nike.

"Cody has just been grinding, getting great talent to some of the hardest places in the world to recruit," Pope said. "So now he's coming at this from a much different angle. This is easy compared to what I've been doing. Because it's Kentucky. And on say that every day, 'It's Kentucky.'"

Even without Calipari, that still carries a lot of weight. Former star John Wall, Calipari's first big recruit at UK, was in the building for the Nike circuit stop in Saturday. He spent plenty of time hugging his old coach, but Wall also sought out Pope and his staff on multiple occasions to welcome them to the family. Even Calipari seemed drawn to that familiar blue hue, gravitating toward Pope throughout the weekend to converse and cut up.

But Calipari used to say: Kentucky isn't for everybody. It was for Brooks, but it wasn't for his former boss at Baylor, Drew, who turned down the Wildcats before Pope took the job.

Itch is one of the great joys in this profession that I got to know in the 2022 NCAA Tournament bubble and someone I greatly respect, but Baylor is home," Drew said Saturday. "Kentucky is home for Pope, so maybe it worked out best for everyone involved. Drew figures. "The good thing is, I can cheer for him now that he's not on our league. Everyone in college basketball knows offensively, Coach Pope's team is tremendously hard to guard and he's on the cutting edge in that realm. But he also understands the importance of defense. We're really good teams, we're very physical, and that's why they had so much success this year in the Big 12. I'm happy for him and Kentucky, because I think they're really good coaches and a very high-character staff."

And the Kentucky faithful all said: That's nice, but when does the first five-star commit?

Vanderbilt transfer bolsters North Carolina frontcourt

By BRENDAN MARKS

The Athletic

Vanderbilt transfer Ven-Allen Lubin has committed to North Carolina, he announced on social media Thursday.

Lubin, who played one season apiece at Notre Dame and Vanderbilt, had two seasons of eligibility remaining. As a sophomore, the 6-foot-8, 226-pound forward averaged 12.3 points, 6.5 rebounds and a 31-percentage game.

With fifth-year starting center Armando Bacot out of eligibility and forward Harrison Ingram departing for the NBA draft, Lubin represents a much-needed frontcourt addition for the Tar Heels. Head coach Hubert Davis and his staff transferred several big men in the transfer portal earlier this offseason — including Aaron Bradshaws (who committed to Ohio State), Jonas Aidoo (Arkansas), and Cliff Omoruyi (Alabama) — but missed on all of them. That left UNC with just three playable



big men for next season, none of whom were starters this year: graduate Jae Lyn Withers, junior Jalen Washington and sophomore Zayden High. Lubin should compete immediately to start, but whether that's at center or forward will likely be determined this summer.

Lubin plays like a conventional big even without traditional

size. Last season, per CBS Analytics, the Orlando native was in the 90th percentile nationally in second-chance points per game (3.6) and the 91st percentile in offensive rebounds per game (2.5). Furthermore, per Synergy, his most-efficient offensive action was offensive putbacks, where he averaged 1.426 points per possession, which rates as "excellent." It

should be no surprise, then, that a whopping 71.6% of his field-goal attempts came either at the rim or in the paint: only 16.1% of his shots were 3-pointers, which he made at a 33.3% rate. Depending on how much time Lubin spends at center vs. forward, expect him to still have some floor-spacing opportunities, but he's clearly at his best operating on the perimeter.

The same applies at the defensive end. Lubin was 14th in the SEC in block percentage, per KenPom, posting at least one blocked shot in 14 of 18 conference games.

Lubin is only the second transfer from North Carolina has brought in this offseason, joining former Belmont sharpshooter Cade Tyson. The Tar Heels originally signed Tyson with the intent of playing him mostly on the perimeter, but like last offseason with Harrison Ingram, larger roster construction may force the coaching staff's hand. Davis and his staff initially wanted Ingram as more of a perimeter-oriented 3, but it

became apparent during the season that he was the team's best option at power forward. Ingram ended up finishing fourth in the ACC in winning percentage per game. Tyson, at 6 feet 7, is similarly suited for the wing but may have to slide up to forward alongside three guards: R.J. Davis, a First-Team All-American and the reigning Jerry West Award winner, Eliot Cadeau, a 31-percentage starter and late-setting point guard, and Ian Jackson, a top-10 incoming freshman. That would leave Lubin, at times, as the lone big man on the floor, with plenty of floor spacing around him offensively — but also lackluster size defensively.

Could Lubin play the four alongside Washington, who only averaged 8.3 minutes per game last season? Or will UNC, which still has two scholarships to fill, add another big body via the transfer portal? Either way, Lubin at least fills a major need and gives the Tar Heels a key piece across multiple lineups.