

Stein glad to have Bryant, Stewart back at UK

By LARRY VAUGHT
Contributing Writer

Obviously Kentucky coach Will Stein is looking for the best possible football players both in the transfer portal and high school ranks. However, he's partial to multi-sport athletes.

"I love kids that run track, play basketball, wrestle, you name it. If all you are doing is playing football, it is not going to make me not recruit you. But I love to see the athleticism, the competitiveness show up in other sports," said Stein, the former Oregon offensive coordinator. "What you want high school sports to be is guys that play multiple sports and really take pride in their school. And it shows their loyalty to the school as well."

Senior safety Ty Bryant certainly meets all those qualifications. As a junior in 2025, Bryant led Kentucky in tackles (76) and interceptions (four) — which also tied for first in the SEC. Bryant also had a pair of tackles for loss and a pass deflection. He was the only UK player to earn all-SEC honors.

At Frederick Douglass High School, he played defensive back, wide receiver, punt returner, kick returner, gunner on punts and placekick holder. He was Frederick Douglass' all-time leading tackler with 273 but he was also a five-year letterman on the baseball team. In the classroom, he had a 4.3 grade-point average.

Bryant had plenty of options to leave Kentucky but is one of 52 players returning from last year's team. He had serious inquiries from LSU, Ohio State, Wisconsin, Notre Dame, Georgia, Alabama and others.

Stein said it was "huge" to keep Bryant at UK for another season.

"Lexington kid. He's a program builder. He's a leader. He's all-conference."



VICKY GRAFF

Ty Bryant (14) led the SEC in interceptions in 2025 and coach Will Stein considers him a "program builder."

He is a phenomenal person," Stein said. "His dad (Cisco) played football here (in the 1980's of coach Jerry Claiborne) with my dad, so, obviously, that connection piece was huge. But he's a damn good ball player, and we wanted to make sure that he was on this team."

Even while Stein was still coaching at Oregon during the college football playoffs, he was evaluating UK's roster and communicating with UK general manager Pat Biondo and assistant general manager Pete Nocita.

"The first thing that we did was to look at this current roster and who we really needed to dive in and make sure that stayed on this roster in the '26 season," Stein said when I asked about the evaluation process for returning players. "We feel really good about the returners coming back."

"It is a bunch of film study, it's doing our research, and it's seeing what type of person they

are. Do they fit the character that we want on our team? And then, schematically, are they what we look for in each position?

"While I was at Oregon, I was watching tape on our current team. We also have Pat Biondo, who I think is the best GM in the country, who's done a phenomenal job since arriving here in Lexington, and then added Pete Nocita from Louisville as our assistant GM. And those guys have really spearheaded building this roster along with me, and I like where we stand right now."

Stein also had to put together a staff. The only full-time position coach he retained was defensive line coach Anwar Stewart. Not only did Stewart play at Kentucky, but he has been UK's defensive line coach since the 2020 season.

The new UK head coach said keeping Stewart was an easy decision.

"When I thought about Kentucky football before I

got here, I thought they had really good D-lines. Anwar is a big piece of that puzzle," Stein said. "You just feel a bond with somebody when you get here. He was somebody that did whatever it took to help retain the players on our roster and acquire new talent."

"Obviously, he is an alum here. I just felt like when you look at building a

coaching staff, you obviously look at the people that are here, who can stay and who can't. You want to do it in your own way. But there are still people on the staff, like (director of operations) Josh Pruitt, that know a lot about this place that is a need."

"A guy like Anwar ... like these are people that I needed early on in the stages. And then they proved that these are the right people for the job. So, yeah, Anwar has been great. Really excited about him."

One new player Stewart will be coaching is Jamarion Harkless, another former Frederick Douglass star. The 6-foot-3, 345-pound Harkless transferred to UK after three years at Purdue where he played in 22 games with 12 starts. He was a three-star prospect in high school where he was Bryant's teammate on the Class 5A state championship team.

"Big interior body that can cause havoc upfront and a guy that has a lot of pride in this city," Stein said about Harkless. "So excited about him. All the guys in that (defensive lineman) room, I think Coach (Jay) Bateman and crew did a great job of evaluating the talent and then obviously acquiring them through the portal. He is going to be a big addition."



See What's Taking Shape Locally

Wildcats fall 80-55 at Vanderbilt

By KEITH TAYLOR
Kentucky Today

NASHVILLE — Slow starts finally caught up with the Kentucky Wildcats on Tuesday night.

Kentucky's recent habit of falling behind and rallying late offered no relief in an 80-55 loss to No. 18 Vanderbilt Commodores, snapping the Wildcats' five-game winning streak.

Kentucky (14-7, 5-3 Southeastern Conference) missed its first nine field-goal attempts and never found an offensive rhythm, producing its lowest scoring output of the season.

"We just got punched in the face early, and we never responded," Kentucky coach Mark Pope said on his postgame radio show.

The Wildcats trailed from the opening tip and never closed the gap to single digits after falling behind 26-10 midway through the first half. Kentucky shot just 28 percent (9 of 32) before halftime and finished the night at 32 percent overall (19 of 59), including 6 of 24 from 3-point range.

The loss marked Kentucky's first SEC defeat since early January, when the Wildcats opened conference play with losses to Alabama and Missouri. In four of their previous five games, Kentucky erased second-half deficits to defeat LSU, Mississippi State, Tennessee and Texas, including road wins at Baton Rouge and

Knoxville.

Kentucky's struggles in Nashville continued after a 94-59 loss to No. 6 Gonzaga earlier this season at Bridgestone Arena.

Beyond shooting woes, the Wildcats were unable to match Vanderbilt's physicality. The Commodores outrebounded Kentucky 43-37, limited the Wildcats to 13 offensive rebounds and forced 15 turnovers that turned into 28 points.

"They hurt us in transition, and their pace was so much better than ours," Pope said. "Our offense was so dysfunctional that we were getting really flat. We got hurt in transition early and throughout the game. We were pretty dysfunctional the whole night."

Otega Oweh led Kentucky with 20 points, while Denzel Aberdeen added 15. Oweh has scored in double figures in all 21 games this season.

Pope said the Wildcats failed to bring the necessary edge.

"That's been a space where we've been fighting a difficult battle all year — embracing being physical and forceful to earn possessions," he said. "We didn't do that at all."

Tyler Tanner scored 19 points to lead Vanderbilt (18-3, 5-3), which won its second straight game after dropping three in a row. The Commodores played without second-leading scorer Duke Miles and are off to their best start since the 1973-74 season.



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