

One of UK football's most important transfer additions working past injury woes

BY JON HALE
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The process of Will Stein recruiting Kentucky's top transfer wide receiver addition began two years before Stein was hired as UK's new football coach.

Stein was then offensive coordinator at Oregon looking for a transfer quarterback to build the Ducks' offense around. That search led him to then-Oklahoma quarterback Dillon Gabriel.

As Stein watched film of Gabriel, he could not help but notice the 6-foot-4, 205-pound receiver who kept catching passes from the quarterback he was evaluating.

"I was like, this guy is popping off," Stein said. "No. 4, this dude's a freak, making plays all over the field."

No. 4 was Nic Anderson, who had just broken an Oklahoma record with 10 touchdown receptions as a redshirt freshman.

Anderson's career stalled from there, though.



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Nic Anderson broke an Oklahoma freshman record with 10 touchdown catches in 2023, but his career has since been derailed by injuries.

He played in just one game at Oklahoma in 2024 due to a persistent quad injury. A transfer to LSU followed, but Anderson struggled to regain his pre-injury form.

Two years after totalling 38 catches for 798 yards and 10 touchdowns, he caught 12 catches for 106 yards and two touchdowns in 10 games while again dealing with nagging injuries.

"Sometimes when you come back from an injury

you're a little bit tentative, or you're not yourself in terms of the most urgent version or aggressive version yourself, because there's just a natural protection that you kind of carry yourself with," said UK offensive coordinator Joe Sloan, who coached Anderson at LSU.

Even after Sloan and the rest of the staff that recruited him to LSU were fired, it appeared Anderson might stay in Baton Rouge to play for new

Tigers coach Lane Kiffin. But two days before the transfer portal window was set to close Anderson decided to transfer for the second consecutive off-season.

Two days after that, he committed to Kentucky, pledging to follow Sloan to Lexington just in time to enroll in classes for the spring semester.

"Obviously, it was big to have Joe and that relationship piece to really solidify that he wanted to come here," Stein said. "And then show him how he is going to make plays in this offense. He is a big, tall, fast, tough receiver that I'm really excited to coach."

As Stein and his new Kentucky staff worked to build a roster while he juggled his responsibilities as Oregon offensive coordinator in the College Football Playoff, wide receiver was the position where the transfer portal strategy appeared to go most off script.

Texas receiver Dante Moore visited UK shortly after the transfer portal opened but ultimately

signed with Colorado. Auburn's Malcolm Simmons (Texas Tech), Texas Rio Grande Valley's Tony Diaz (Iowa) and Colorado's Dre'lon Miller (Baylor) all looked like possible featured additions before signing elsewhere.

Meanwhile, seven receivers from the 2025 Kentucky roster entered the portal, leaving only freshman DJ Miller and little-used veteran backup Ashton Cozart as possible returners.

The new staff had landed a commitment from four-star Louisiana prep receiver Kenny Darby shortly after being hired in December and signed Xavier Daisy (UAB), Ja'Kayden Ferguson (Arkansas) and Brock Coffman (Louisville) from the transfer portal, but none were proven quantities at the power conference level. A commitment from prolific Southern Utah receiver Shane Carr during the final weekend of the portal window helped ease some nerves, but even he faced questions about the jump from FCS football to the SEC.

In Anderson, the staff finally secured a receiver who had proven capable of starring at the highest levels of college football.

"Injuries are part of the game," Anderson said after a recent spring practice. "Unfortunately, I've had more (than) my fair share of injuries. But I'm always just looking ahead.

And I feel good right now. My body feels good.

"Training staff here is great. Strength staff here is great, and they really got my body into a great spot. So I feel good going into this next season."

The receiver room was further boosted when Hardley Gilmore, who signed with Baylor as an outgoing transfer in January, elected to remain at Kentucky. Stein has made it clear tight ends Willie Rodriguez, Henry Boyer and Mikkel Skinner will play a featured role in the passing game this fall.

Perhaps Miller breaks out into a starring role after impressing as a freshman. Maybe one of the other transfer additions surprises.

But the path to a prolific passing attack in 2026 for Kentucky almost certainly involves Anderson at least coming close to the promise he showed as a redshirt freshman at Oklahoma.

Anderson and his coaches are still months from learning if his injury woes are behind him, but early reviews are at least strong. "He's been vocal," Sloan said. "He's attacked everything. The detail he's playing with, the way he's communicating, the way he's leading, it's been awesome to see. It's really fun.

"He seems like he's having a lot of fun playing football, and I'm pumped for him."

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