



NICK KING USA TODAY Network via Reuters Co

Jaxon Kohler led the Big Ten in defensive rebounding rate as a senior at Michigan State last season.

Kohler turns down Kentucky to finish college basketball career at home

BY BEN ROBERTS
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Mark Pope and the Kentucky men’s basketball coaching staff made a spirited run at transfer portal star Jaxon Kohler this week.

In the end, the Cats came up short.

Kohler — a 6-foot-10 forward from American Fork, Utah — committed to BYU on Thursday night, picking the Cougars as the final stop in his college basketball career as he awaits word on his eligibility for the 2026-27 season. American Fork is a suburb of Provo, where BYU is located.

He was also considering Kentucky, Kansas and Louisville before whittling down his options to BYU and UK earlier Thursday.

One of dozens of players from the high school class of 2022 who have joined lawsuits around the country in hopes of earning a fifth season of NCAA eligibility, Kohler and his fellow plaintiffs in a California court case were granted a temporary injunction this week that allowed them to enter the transfer portal and look for a new school as the legal process played out.

Within minutes of Kohler hitting the transfer

portal Tuesday, Pope was on the phone with the 23-year-old player. That urgency earned UK’s staff the first Zoom call with Kohler and his family Wednesday afternoon. Jeff Kohler, the player’s father, told the Herald-Leader that it was an “awesome” conversation that lasted two and half hours.

It wasn’t enough to bring Kohler to Lexington, however.

BYU began the process as the consensus favorite (though Kohler’s father disputed that narrative in an interview with the Herald-Leader on Wednesday) and head coach Kevin Young was able to close the deal on a player who gained the reputation last season as one of the best rebounders in college basketball.

Kohler averaged 12.5 points and 8.9 rebounds per game as a senior at Michigan State last season. He has spent all four years of his college career with the Spartans, making 69 starts over the past two seasons for coach Tom Izzo’s program. He also shot 38.9% on 149 3-point attempts as a senior.

At BYU, he’ll join a roster that features former UK guard Collin Chandler, who transferred to the Big 12 program this offseason, and star point

guard Rob Wright, who visited Lexington as he explored a potential transfer before ultimately deciding to return to Provo.

Pope, who also recruited Kohler out of high school when he was the head coach at BYU, has been looking for more physicality as he tries to find the right fit for the 15th spot on Kentucky’s 2026-27 roster.

UK’s full attention will now turn to All-SEC forward Mark Mitchell, who was a McDonald’s All-American in the 2022 high school class before starting for two years at Duke as an underclassman and emerging as a standout player at Missouri over the past two seasons.

Mitchell has joined an eligibility lawsuit against the NCAA in the state of Kentucky, and an initial ruling in that case is expected to come Friday. Mitchell and his fellow plaintiffs are seeking temporary relief from the NCAA’s eligibility and transfer portal rules after players from the 2022 class were not grandfathered into the organization’s new age-based eligibility model, which will give all current and future college athletes five years to play up to five seasons.

Due to NCAA rules, college coaches are not permitted to directly contact Mitchell and other players in his situation until they officially enter the transfer portal, which they cannot do without a court ruling.

If Mitchell is able to enter the portal, a move that could come as soon as Friday, the Kentucky staff is expected to reach out to the 6-9 forward directly and move as quickly as possible to gain his commitment for next season.

Mitchell averaged 18.3 points, 5.2 rebounds and 3.6 assists per game as a senior at Missouri last season. He scored a career-high 32 points in an SEC Tournament loss to Kentucky.

Kentucky is projected to begin the season in the 15-20 range in the Top 25 rankings, with a lineup featuring sophomore center Malachi Moreno and transfer portal headliners Milan Momcilovic, Zoom Diallo and Alex Wilkins, though the addition of Mitchell would likely boost the Cats’ standing nationally.

He transferred back to the Red Raiders for the 2026-27 campaign and is among the fifth-year seniors attempting to gain one more season of eligibility.

McCasland could also add more key pieces to his roster in the coming weeks, with a flood of fifth-year players expected to return to college basketball as a result of eligibility lawsuits against the NCAA.

The addition of Texas Tech to the home schedule gives UK one more marquee name for home fans. Louisville is the only power conference program on the nonconference regular season slate of Rupp games. UK added Wichita State to its home schedule last week.

The Cats are still expected to have one of the most difficult schedules in the country next season. They’ll play neutral site games against Indiana, Kansas and North Carolina, with a road game at Virginia and an 18-game slate against competition from the SEC, which is once again expected to be the toughest league in the sport.

Kentucky’s regular season opener will be played against Manhattan on Nov. 3 in Rupp Arena.

The Cats are projected to be a preseason Top 25 team, led by the return of starting center Malachi Moreno and a highly touted transfer class that features expected starters Milan Momcilovic, Zoom Diallo and Alex Wilkins.

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