

Mark Pope sidesteps talk about multi-million NIL offer

BY DAVE SKRETTA
AP BASKETBALL WRITER

ST. LOUIS — Kentucky coach Mark Pope spent the eve of the Wildcats' first-round NCAA Tournament game against Santa Clara on Thursday dancing around whether Michigan All-American Yaxel Lendeborg had turned down a lucrative offer to play for him, and blasted the media for contributing to what he called a "circus" surrounding his program.

Lendeborg, who was among the nation's most coveted players when he decided to leave UAB, told The Associated Press in a story published Monday that what Kentucky offered "started the number with \$7 (million) to \$9 (million)," and that the implication was "they were pretty much going off on the route like, 'We'll pay him anything to get here.'"

Instead, Lendeborg said, he chose to play for Dusty May and the Wolverines for



JAMES CRISP/Associated Press

Kentucky head coach Mark Pope tries to motivate his team the March 7 game with Florida. In St. Louis for the NCAA Tournament, he spent Thursday primarily responding to recruit questions.

about three times less money.

That made headlines across the country but especially in Kentucky, where the perennially powerful Wildcats tend to dominate front pages come March. And it quickly became the latest

distraction for a team that has dealt with plenty of them.

Asked point-blank Thursday whether such an offer was made to Lendeborg, Pope began as if he would answer in a similarly direct manner. But then the

coach segued into a disertation on the state of the media, and about the "circus that comes with Kentucky," and eventually Pope seemed to imply that what Lendeborg said was inaccurate.

"I know that you guys have to come out of here with a headline. I'm not going to give it to you," Pope said, "but I would appreciate it if some segment of the media is like, 'Let's actually search for like' — I don't know. I'm trying not to make a commentary on it."

"This is all part of the distraction that my team is not a part of. We will try and embrace the circus nature of this and count on some responsible media member somewhere to actually kind of dig in and find out or just be responsible reporting."

Pope was not combative while speaking to a small group of reporters at the Enterprise Center for practice. In fact, Pope responded to multiple questions about Lendeborg

with a broad smile and folksy demeanor.

He just didn't respond with any real answers.

"What makes (Kentucky) different than anyone else," Pope said after one question, "is if anybody wants clicks they can just say any crazy thing or write any crazy thing or click any crazy thing about Kentucky, and they are going to get clicks and likes, and they are going to get controversy. It's the way we elevate our stature in the media, unfortunately. This is a broad brush; I'm not talking about every media member or social media member, which is really not a media member at all."

Pope guessed the percentage of news that is reported accurately about his program was "in the fifth percentile."

"There's nobody more surprised about what the head coach at Kentucky has done than the head coach of Kentucky," Pope said. "I am shocked by it every single day."

KENTUCKY VS. SANTA CLARA

Santa Clara Broncos (26-8, 17-4 WCC) vs. Kentucky Wildcats (21-13, 12-9 SEC)

St. Louis; 12:15 p.m. EDT Friday

BOTTOM LINE: Kentucky and Santa Clara meet in the NCAA Tournament opening round.

The Wildcats are 12-9 against SEC opponents and 9-4 in non-conference play. Kentucky scores 80.8 points and has outscored opponents by 7.0 points per

game.

The Broncos' record in WCC games is 17-4. Santa Clara is second in the WCC scoring 82.9 points per game and is shooting 46.8%.

Kentucky averages 8.1 made 3-pointers per game, 1.1 more made shots than the 7.0 per game Santa Clara gives up. Santa Clara averages 10.1 made 3-pointers per game this season, 2.7 more made shots on average than the 7.4 per game Ken-

tucky gives up.

TOP PERFORMERS: Collin Chandler averages 2.1 made 3-pointers per game for the Wildcats, scoring 9.9 points while shooting 42.7% from beyond the arc. Otega Oweh is averaging 18.2 points and 1.8 steals over the last 10 games.

Christian Hammond is averaging 15.8 points for the Broncos. Allen Graves is averaging 14.6 points over the last 10 games.

LAST 10 GAMES: Wildcats:

4-6, averaging 78.8 points, 32.6 rebounds, 15.1 assists, 6.8 steals and 3.4 blocks per game while shooting 44.7% from the field. Their opponents have averaged 79.8 points per game.

Broncos: 7-3, averaging 81.1 points, 30.4 rebounds, 15.0 assists, 8.0 steals and 2.4 blocks per game while shooting 45.4% from the field. Their opponents have averaged 76.3 points.

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