

# Kentucky commit Justin Edwards will embrace being pushed by John Calipari



**Vaught's Views**

**Larry Vaught**

Philadelphia sportswriter Joseph Santoliquito has watched Justin Edwards blossom into one of the nation's best players in the 2023 recruiting class and it did not surprise him when the 6-7, 180-pound athletic wing verbally committed to Kentucky last week. "When Cal (John Calipari) totally invested in him, that really swayed Justin," said Santoliquito. "It was a dream of his to go to Kentucky and now it is coming to fruition. I have been around Cal and know how persuasive he can be.

"He was getting hit up by coaches even when it narrowed it to Tennessee and Kentucky. After talking to his mother and coach, he was putting a lot of heat on himself. He made a good decision that he can be happy with."

Edwards played a big role in making Calipari and Kentucky fans happy, too.

"I think that kick in the tail Kentucky got last year getting beat by Saint Peter's put a charge up his (Calipari's) tail. He seems like a new and invigorated guy," Santoliquito said. "I am not saying he put it on cruise control before but what happened might have been a blessing in disguise. He has a lot of motivation to turn things back around and I know he's really going to push Justin."

Santoliquito met Calipari when New Jersey phenom Tyreke Evans played for Memphis.

"Cal pushed Tyreke and changed his mindset to put more emphasis on defense. That's what Cal will do with Justin. He will tweak and push that defensive side that no one likes. He will pull that out of Justin," Santoliquito said. "If Justin wants to play defense, he will shut your tail down. That light will be lit constantly by Cal."

Edwards led Imhotep Charter (28-4) to a Philadelphia city championship and Pennsylvania state title last season when he averaged 18.3 points and 8.3 rebounds per game. Edwards played well on the Nike EYBL circuit and then averaged 16.3 points, seven rebounds, three steals and one assist per game in six games at Peach Jam.

Edwards is a consensus top three player in the 2023 recruiting class and many analysts believe he could be No. 1 when the year ends.

"He is a great player. No question about that. But he is also possibly an even better player," Edwards said. "You don't have to worry about where he is at 2 or 3 in the morning. If he is up, he's playing video games. He is someone I

like to define who arrived with a work ethic that exceeded his talent. Now they go hand in hand. He made his talent blossom. I don't think he was a top 50 player as a sophomore and now he arguably is the No. 1 player in the 2023 class. He got bigger physically, matured mentally and made himself into someone special."

The Philadelphia sportswriter believes Edwards checks all the boxes to be a successful player for Calipari at Kentucky. He also believes Calipari is the right coach to help him reach his goal of playing in the NBA.

"I know the effort he puts into his players. Justin will embrace that. He loves being pushed and challenged," Santoliquito said. "I don't know if he can be a one-and-done player only because he's got to put more meat on his bones. He's got to develop into a man. But as he grows and matures physically, he's only going to be better. His best basketball is ahead of him."

Another Kentucky commit, North Laurel senior Reed Sheppard, obviously feels the same way about Edwards.

"I got to watch him play a little bit at the (NBPA) Top 100 Camp, hung out with him a little bit," Sheppard said last week at his basketball camp in Georgetown. "It was really neat being around him, talking to him, trying to convince him to come to Kentucky while we were there at that camp. I kind of had an idea before that he was going to come to Kentucky."

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Kentucky was picked second in the Eastern Division behind Georgia by media members at SEC Media Days. However, SEC Network show host Paul Finebaum thinks even more highly of the Wildcats.

During an appearance on "McElroy & Cubelic In The Morning" he gave UK as the most likely SEC champion behind Alabama and Georgia, the defending national champion.

"The question remains very difficult but I'd probably go with Kentucky only because I know what they have. All it's going to take for Kentucky is to hold serve on games that they have to win then may be pull that one upset," Finebaum said.

"Have a type of season where Will Lewis just rises up and ends up being one of the top couple of quarterbacks in the country and ultimately upset Georgia."

Beating Georgia is no easy task but Finebaum said Kentucky was the only school he could make a valid argument for winning the SEC other than Alabama and Georgia.

"The rest of them I think you're just simply taking too big of a risk. Whether it's Texas A&M pulling off the Alabama win, Florida



Kentucky commit Justin Edwards of Philadelphia could be a lockdown defender for coach John Calipari. (Twitter Photo)

having a miracle first season like Gus Malzahn (at Auburn)," Finebaum said.

"Something along those lines. I can't come up with one frankly other than to play the odds and give you Kentucky."

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Kentucky assistant coach Chin Coleman has one word — "fearless" — he likes best about freshman basketball players Cason Wallace and Chris Livingston.

"They're fearless. These two guys, Chris and Cason, they're fearless. They have fear but they're fearless," Coleman said.

The Kentucky assistant coach has his own way with words and expressions and explained how the two UK players could have fear and be fearless at the same time.

"The fear that they have is fear of whether they're good enough. That's why they work so hard. That fear, you want that fear. They're fearless in the way that they play in terms of not being afraid of a car crash, attacking the rim, dunking on people, really being those dudes that play downhill and that obviously can make shots and do other things," Coleman said.

"But the best word for them is that they're fearless, but they have fear. The fear that they're not good enough, so they work so hard trying to get better."

That fear/fearlessness could help Kentucky in an unexpected way. John Calipari wants to emphasize better rim protection with more blocked shots — a staple of his best teams — because that leads to extra offensive possessions.

"Challenging Oscar (Tshiebwe), challenging Daimion (Collins), challenging Lance (Ware), challenging Jacob (Toppin), challenging Chris, and surprisingly enough, you'll get some shot-blocking and chasing down from Cason. He's pretty athletic," UK assistant coach Orlando Antigua said about Wallace even though he's a guard.

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Georgia Chambers is a sports reporter for WAFF 48, a NBC-TV affiliate in Huntsville,



Freshman Cason Wallace and Chris Livingston, above, both have a fear they are not good enough that helps motivate them to improve. (Vicky Graff Photo)

Ala., who watched recent UK commit Koby Keenum play for Mars Hill Bible School in Florence, Ala., last season. She was also at his commitment ceremony where he picked UK over Penn State, North Carolina and Louisville.

"It's such a great story with him. He wanted to play baseball and did not play football until he was a freshman. His story shows if you have the dedication and play good football the big coaches will find you even at a small school," Chambers said. "It's just a feel-good story for him and his family."

Chambers, a Georgia graduate, said when Keenum, the nation's third-ranked center in the 2023 recruiting class according to Rivals.com, picked Kentucky the room "erupted" in cheers.

"This is as big for the community and the school as him. This will inspire a lot of guys coming after him," Chambers said.

Chambers worked with the recruiting team at Georgia when she was in school. Keenum had 55 scholarship offers and she wondered how Kentucky got to No. 1 on his list.

"He said the coaching staff at Kentucky set them apart from other offers. He thought they would do the most for him as a player and was easily the best fit for him," Chambers said. "I had a friend who works at North Carolina and she had told me he

wasn't picking them. Kentucky was the favorite for a lot of people who knew him and it did not surprise them he picked Kentucky."

What about Keenum throwing the L's down after picking UK over Louisville?

"It was funny," Chambers said. "He picked up the Louisville hat and then went for Kentucky. He unzips his jacket (showing a Kentucky shirt) and everybody cheered. Then they brought out Kentucky cupcakes and cake. It was a very happy environment considering four years ago he was not even playing football."

Chambers was impressed that not only did Keenum's mother thank the station for their coverage but the UK commit did the same.

"Of course, he also wanted to know what time it (his commitment) would be on TV," Chambers said. "But he's such a great young man. It was amazing just to see how happy he was. Florence, Alabama, is all he knows but now he gets his chance on the big stage. It kind of gives me chills thinking about it."

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Tony Geiger's son is UK junior defensive back Jalen Geiger and he's not shy about showing his support for the Wildcats in Columbia, S.C., where the Geigers live.

"In front of our house there is a big UK flag," Tony Geiger said. "We

are nestled between Clemson and South Carolina fans but I show my UK love on my truck, too. We push the Big Blue Nation here."

Kentucky has dominated the recent series with South Carolina, a trend expected to continue this year. Tony Geiger says his son believes UK is good enough to reach the SEC championship game this year.

"South Carolina has a great venue and a respectable program but Jalen just loved everything about Kentucky," Tony Geiger said. "I am actually pretty surprised sometimes walking around with my UK T-shirt on at the respect UK gets locally. It might be something like, 'You guys got our number.'"

Kentucky opens the season Sept. 3 hosting Miami at 7 p.m. in Lexington. Tony Geiger and his wife will be there way before kickoff.

"We tailgate at every game and get there at 7:30 no matter whether it is an afternoon or night game. We enjoy our tailgate and make a day of it," Tony Geiger said.

Jalen Geiger is one of 115 players nationally named to the watch list for the Wuerffel Trophy, college football's premier award for community service. Kentucky's Courtney Love won the award in 2017.

Geiger played in all 13 games last year with two starts when UK went 10-3. He had 18 tackles and an interception return for a touchdown.