

Dioubate's physical toughness is a "priceless gift"



Vaught's Views
Larry Vaught

Every time Kentucky's season has seemed on the brink of collapse the Wildcats have found a way to resurrect hopes for a successful season.

In a three-game span, UK overcame first-half deficits of 12 points to Mississippi State, 16 to LSU and 17 to Tennessee to win all three games. The last time Kentucky came back from at least 12 points behind in three straight was 2017 against Florida (12), Vanderbilt (19) and Texas A&M (15). Kentucky led only 34 seconds at Tennessee after leading for only 70 seconds at LSU.

In the 80-78 win at Tennessee last week — UK's fourth straight win in Knoxville — one of the key players was Mo Dioubate had scored only four points and played 25 minutes combined against Mississippi State and LSU. He lost his starting job to Andrija Jelavic and many fans blamed his lack of offense for UK's woes.

Dioubate had to have heard the noise but he was ready to make his physical presence felt at Tennessee and had 10 points and a team-high six rebounds, including four offensive boards. He changed the complexion of the game with his toughness the way coach Mark Pope envisioned he could when he transferred from Alabama.

"I'm so proud of him. He just wanted to be him. He wanted to be the greatness that Mo Dioubate is. We've talked about it over the course of the year, but when guys love themselves, when they love what they bring, that's special and magical to this game, then they're great," Pope said after the Tennessee win. "He was unbelievable. His impact on the game was way bigger than his (stat) line."

Dioubate admitted on the UK Radio Network postgame show with Jack Givens that losing his starting job was something he had to accept and overcome.

"You've just got to be a team player to begin with. There's a lot of adversity, playing at this level or any level, but you've got to do what's best for your team," Dioubate told Givens. "Do what you do good, try to do it better than anybody else, and other opportunities are going to present themselves when you do that. So just be the team player, and whatever you can do to help your team win, do that, and everything else is going to fall in line with you."

ESPN analyst Jay Bilas thought Dioubate might have been trying too hard to do something that was not his strength.

"I think he has been trying to prove he can knock down perimeter shots when the things he does best are play physical, chase down rebounds and be a relentless defender," Bilas said. "He can guard multiple spots. His best thing is the energy he brings."

Pope said Dioubate's toughness was a "priceless gift" that few players have.



Coach Mark Pope believes that Mo Dioubate's physical toughness is a "priceless gift." (Vicky Graff Photo)

Quote of the Week:

"Awesome play Cap, incredible shot. And to my Camelot friends (in Kentucky), there was a big man on the ball," former Kentucky coach Rick Pitino after Malachi Moreno hit the game-winning shot at LSU similar to the shot Duke's Christian Laettner hit on the same type of play in the 1992 NCAA Tournament.

"It's equivalent to (NBA star) Steph Curry having the greatest stroke in the world, in the sense that his toughness makes him special, just like a guy that Koby Brea makes 3's makes him special," Pope said. "And when he embraces his toughness, he changes the whole complexion of the game. And he did that for us tonight."

After three years at Alabama, offensive lineman Olaus Alinen decided he was ready for a change and even though he had no prior connections with the Kentucky coach staff, he quickly decided UK was the right transfer spot for him.

The 6-foot-6, 320-pound Finland native was recruited by Kentucky's previous staff when he came to the United States to play at Loomis Chaffee — a prep school in Connecticut. Kentucky offered him a scholarship between his freshman and sophomore years but he eventually picked Alabama over Georgia, Miami, Ohio State and Oregon. He was a four-star recruit and top 200 player nationally.

"Kentucky was definitely one of the first schools to reach out after I decided to look for another opportunity," said Alinen. "I didn't really know the coaches but I enjoyed getting to know them."

Offensive coordinator Joe Sloan and offensive line coach Cutter Leftwich didn't need long to make a favorable impression on Alinen.

"Probably about 20 schools reached out and it was definitely more hectic than I thought it would be. I was glad to see I had good options but coach Cutter and coach Sloan really stood out," the offensive lineman said.

Alinen redshirted his first year at Alabama and played mainly special teams the last two seasons. He said he got "bigger, stronger, faster" with the Alabama strength staff.

"I also got to hone my skills going against great competition every day. I was primarily a guard most of the time and I am more naturally comfortable at guard but I can also play tackle if needed," he said.

Alinen's father,

Klaus, was the first Finnish player to ever sign a NFL contract and played for Berlin in NFL Europe from 2003-2005 and spent a year on the Atlanta Falcons practice squad.

"My dad's uncle also played football and that's where my dad picked it up," Alinen said. "Football in Finland is small and not played at a high level. My dad was pretty old when he started playing and to see him make it at the highest level was a huge inspiration to me. He has always been a great mentor to me in every way possible about how to be a man."

Alinen was part of a college football playoff team last season while UK went a combined 9-15 the last two seasons under former coach Mark Stoops. Alinen believes Stein is already "building something different" at Kentucky.

"The culture he is establishing and what we are doing to do will be amazing with the guys he is bringing in. You can see the history of him being successful and winning. He has a lot of guys on the staff who have a lot of experience with winning even in places that have not always traditionally won," Alinen said. "In college football these days a lot can change in one off-season. We have seen it with Indiana. Anything is possible if you have the right mindset."

Alinen, 22, did not know any of his teammates when he got to Kentucky (he played with twins Jerod and Jacob Smith in Connecticut but they transferred to Louisville earlier this month). However, he's used to coping with new situations.

"I went to another country alone and had to figure out how to get a place to live, get a driver's license, get a visa, pay taxes and figure out how to handle everything on my own," the UK offensive lineman said. "It has all been a big maturity experience for me that is setting me up to be successful for the rest of my life."

He only gets to go back home about once a year after spring practice but says his parents are excited about him being at Kentucky.

"They are excited to see what Kentucky is like and come to games. They are fully support-

ive of this move and wanted me to do what was best for my playing career," he said. "I was looking for the right fit and opportunity for me. Coach Cutter is an awesome coach who does a great job developing players. He's a down to earth guy. The whole system suits me well and I think I am the type of player who can thrive in this offense."

"I try to pride myself as someone who knows the offense completely and knows what everyone around me is doing. That makes my job easier. I want to be nasty and move people around but also fluid in pass protection."

He's also not worried about a new group of offensive linemen meshing into a functional unit before the season starts. Kentucky has also added left tackle Lance Heard of Tennessee, center Coleton Price of Baylor, guard Tegra Tshabola of Ohio State, tackle Mark Robinson of UTEP and guard Max Anderson of Tennessee.

"I think it is cool we are all coming in as new guys together," Alinen said. "We do not know a lot of people in Lexington in general so we will lean on each other and do things together. That will develop bonds and hopefully we will be the most dynamic group on the team."

Max Duffy played in 34 career games in his three seasons as Kentucky's punter and finished as UK's all-time leading punter averaging 46 yards per punt. His 75-yard punt at Auburn in 2020 ranks as the third longest kick in UK history. In 2019 he was the Ray Guy Award winner as the nation's top punter.

Duffy was from Perth, Australia, and did not start playing football until age 15. He worked with ProKick Australia to get to the United States and turned down several offers, including one from Alabama, to kick at Kentucky.

He stayed in Kentucky after his career ended and coached at Murray State after tryouts with several professional teams did not work out.

"I am back working in Australia training guys to come over to the States and live out



Olaus Alinen considered Kentucky before going to Alabama and now three years later he transferred to UK. (UK Athletics Photo)

their dreams like I did," Duffy said last week.

One of those guys — Tom O'Hara — will be on coach Will Stein's first team at Kentucky after announcing he was transferring from Murray State to UK. O'Hara is from Melbourne, Australia, and averaged 44.9 yards per punt in 2024 and 43.8 yards per kick during the 2025 season and had a career-best 71-yard punt.

"The company I work for got him to the United States and he's basically had the same journey I did other than he started at Murray," Duffy said. "The company I work for helped get him in touch with Kentucky but his output on the field is what really allowed him to be recruited by Kentucky."

What does Duffy like best about O'Hara?

"Consistency and a very humble, good guy which is a great mindset for SEC football," Duffy answered.

Aiden Laros was UK's punter the last two seasons after transferring from Middle Tennessee. He averaged 45.4 yards per punt in 2024 and 44.5 yard per kick last season.

Duffy actually recommended Laros to former UK coach Mark Stoops.

"I really liked Aidan Laros but the recent (special teams) coordinator (Jay Boulware) was terrible and didn't allow for an Australian to prosper and highlight his skill sets," Duffy said. "We should be back to good now and really excited for what Tom will do at Kentucky."

Freshman Kaelyn Carroll was a McDonald's All-American and came to Kentucky with big expectations. She has played in 17 games averaging about 14 minutes per game and is averaging 5.3 points and 2.9 rebounds per game.

The 6-foot-3 freshman has shown she can hit consistently from 3-point range but coach Kenny Brooks likes a lot more than just her shooting.

"We always knew she could shoot the basketball and she's probably our most consistent shooter," Brooks said. "She just needs opportunities."

Brooks likes that she is playing with more physicality, especially after the elbow injury that has sidelined senior forward Teonni Key indefinitely.

"She's also thinking the game better and quicker," the UK coach said. "We don't need her to be a defensive stopper. She's just got to make sure she is not a defensive liability because she offers so much on the offensive end. She helps stretch the floor and defenses have to know where she is and that leaves the lane open for Clara (Strack), Tonie (Morgan), Jordan (Obi)."

She had five points, two rebounds, two blocks, one steal and one assist in 19 minutes when UK upset No. 5 Oklahoma with Key out. She also had to defend Oklahoma All-American center Reagan Beers at times.

"She grew up a little bit (against Oklahoma). She wasn't perfect on the defensive end. She missed a key box out, but she fought," Brooks said.

Point guard Tonie Morgan was impressed by her freshman teammate in that game.

"She guarded an All-American player and did a phenomenal job. We all know she can shoot the ball and score it. So as she continues to get better in other areas, it's going to be fun to watch her," Morgan said. "She has improved so much already and gained so much confidence but you know there is still a lot more she can do for us."

Kentucky volleyball coach Craig Skinner has added five freshmen for his 2026 roster and two of them — 5-foot-10 outside hitter Bellamie Beus of Idaho and 5-foot-8 libero/defensive specialist Sidney Burley of Minnesota — are already on campus.

"Bellamie was the Idaho Gatorade Player of the Year and an Under Armour All-American. She's very explosive, very athletic and a great competitor," Skinner said. "Sidney was an Under Armour All-American as well and is a very athletic libero."

The other three signees — 6-foot-4 hitter Bryah Breaux of Maryland, 5-foot-9 setter Caroline Prihoda of Texas and 6-foot-3 middle blocker Gracison Saylor of Georgia — will not be on campus until June.

"Bryah is huge. She can touch like 10-10. Gracison plays for one of the best clubs in the country in Atlanta and is a big middle. Carolina played in the same club as (SEC Freshman of the Year) Kassie O'Brien," Skinner said. "It's just a really good group of people that fit the needs we have."

"We have a pretty big roster of 16 (players) and maybe adding another one (via the transfer portal). Last year we had 14 players and obviously managing people and playing time and roles is super important and definitely will be for us next season with a bigger roster."

All five freshmen attended camp at Kentucky.

"That definitely helps you get to know kids when they are at camp just like it does when you get them on campus early like Bellamie and Sidney are," Skinner said. "But overall we have a really good class of talented players who are also very good people."