

# Kenny Walker on Pope, UK recruiting, current players



Vaught's Views  
Larry Vaught

Kenny Walker was a McDonald's All-American in Roberta, Ga., in 1982 who played his college basketball at Kentucky for coach Joe Hall. He became an All-American who scored 2,080 points — only Dan Issel had more with 2,138 — and was a member of the charter class of the UK Athletics Hall of Fame.

After his professional career ended, Walker stayed in Lexington and was as excited as most UK fans when coach Mark Pope's second season started.

"Early I went to a lot of practices. I was super excited about this team. I heard about the big payroll and us having two players at every position. After we beat Purdue (in an exhibition game), it gave us all a false sense of hope about how good this team could be," said Walker. "The talent was there but injuries started to pile up. I think that got into coach Pope's head. He had to play a lot of guys he was not ready to play, especially at point guard."

Walker watched Jasper Johnson, Trent Noah and Brandon Garrison all look "really good" in early practices but that has not been the case recently.

"Guys were playing early and then not playing. Then the injured guys went out and Jasper and Trent were getting a chance to play again. I think they got frustrated and confused and just have not been sure about their roles," Walker, the fifth overall pick by the New York Knicks in the 1986 NBA draft, said.

Walker has been critical of Pope and the team in his role as a UK basketball analyst for radio station WVLK-AM.

"I am cautious about criticizing kids. Pope is still learning. They are having a bad year. They still need to make adjustments as a team," Walker said. "I watched (Malachi) Moreno play the last couple of years. I am glad he came to UK but I thought he would be going against Jayden Quaintance and Brandon Garrison in practice. I really did not think he would play much and now he is the best big guy we have."

He did not play well overall at South Carolina but still had 11 rebounds. He blocks shots. He was not known as a passer but he has gotten better. He does get pushed around and bobbles the ball, but he is just going to get better and better because he was forced to play and he showed against Vanderbilt that he is learning how to be more physical."

Walker believes Pope has made a mistake by not hiring a general manager like other blue blood programs have.

"You can no longer go out and tell kids we are a blue blood and just sell the history and tradition of Kentucky basketball. If we keep doing that, we are going to turn into UCLA and Indiana. Other top programs are getting people together to be general managers and



Kenny Walker has been pleasantly surprised by the development of freshman center Malachi Moreno. (Vicky Graff Photo)

handle the money and recruiting to land a top player," Walker said.

"I think the money is there. The problem Pope has rolled the dice on some guys he has gone after. Maybe he ought to start going after superstar college players. Do what you have to do to land superstar kids out of high school. We have been involved with some but have lost them to Duke, Kansas, North Carolina. Whatever those schools are doing, Kentucky has to do if we want to win at a high level."

Walker has ideas on how he would prioritize current players he would want on UK's 2026-27 roster starting with 6-foot-8 sophomore Kam Williams, a Tulane transfer who broke his foot in January and has not played since.

"I really like that kid (Williams). He was starting to take off when he got hurt," Walker said. "Nobody talks enough about him. He is 6-8, can guard multiple positions, had a good attitude and was a great team player. He hit eight 3's in one game and then the next game barely touched the ball. When he went down, we didn't have a guy from the defensive standpoint to help Oweh with other tough scorers. He's a guy I would love to see back."

He also has a different perspective on Quaintance, who has played in only four games because of a knee injury and is still projected as a first round NBA Draft pick in June.

"His (draft) stock has slipped. He was a top 10 pick when the year started but now I am not sure he is a lock to be a first round pick and if he's not I am trying to convince him to come back for a full year," Walker said. "I would tell him I would tailor the offense to feature the big guys with JQ and Malachi."

Walker thinks Collin Chandler, who was sensational in a win over Vanderbilt, should definitely be back and has mixed emotions about injured point guard Jaland Lowe. He would go "all-in" to keep Moreno, Johnson and Noah, three in-state players.

"I would like to see all the Kentucky kids back.

Thopenoneofthemmake an emotional decision and leave. If they just stay here, they can be a legend and be taken care of and I think all of them can be very good players," Walker said. "Give Jasper another year in the weight room and let him work on his defense and ball handling. He is an exciting player. He's like Rex (Chapman), if he hits one or two, he can go on a huge run."

"I would like to see him be patient and stay here but kids have to be happy. I know his father (Dennis Johnson) is giving him good advice. I hope he is back along with some other guys because you don't want to have a completely new roster every year."

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How big a factor did Kentucky baseball coach Nick Mingione play in Cincinnati Moeller quarterback Matt Ponatoski committing to Kentucky?

"The relationship with coach Mingione was important. Coach Mingione was great. We had such a wonderful visit with him," said Becky Ponatoski, the player's mother. "He is just a positive, upbeat person."

"Matt also really liked his faith and how God is in the center of his program and his life. Matt wants to be part of that. Then the whole baseball staff was so energetic and Matt really thrives in that type of environment."

He's a four-star quarterback who threw for 10,145 yards and 118 touchdowns with only 14 interceptions at Moeller but has also been ranked as a top 20 high school baseball prospect in the 2026 class by Baseball America.

"Matt was very clear with everybody

he spoke with that he was going to do both sports in college and if that wasn't something that the school would allow, then he wasn't going to be interested in that school," Becky Ponatoski said. "There were other schools that said playing both sports was a deal breaker and we said that was fine and we know it is an incredibly hard thing to do. So we understood."

"But if there is anybody who I would put my money on, it would be Matt because he is just super focused, hard working and extremely competitive. If anybody is gonna give it a shot at doing both, it is gonna be him."

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Kentucky assistant coach Josh Petersen insists he's not "exaggerating" when he talks about how often opponents either double team, or maybe triple team, junior center Clara Strack.

"Every time she touches the ball, there's some type of scheme defensively on her," said Petersen. "Yet she has consistently produced great numbers. That's when you know you've got somebody special."

"In games against big teams, she almost has to be perfect for us to pull off some stuff and she's done that with some incredible games. She is such an efficient player and you see the versatility she has added this year with the 3-ball. She is willing to put in the time to be better."

Coach Kenny Brooks likes the way she has evolved as a vocal leader also even though she recently only turned 20.

"She is supposed to be a sophomore age-wise. She is still developing as a vocal leader," the Kentucky coach said.

## Quote of the Week:

"I am extremely proud of her for all her accomplishments. The UK Hall of Fame and now this is just icing on the cake for everything she has done. All earned and well deserved," former UK guard Anthony Epps on his daughter, Makayla Epps, being inducted into the Kentucky High School Athletic Association Hall of Fame.

## Quote of the Week 2:

"The thing that makes Kentucky different I would say is the fans, BBN nation. I think they are just amazing. They come to support us each and every night. Wearing the jersey is just a privilege," Kentucky senior Amelia Hassett on the UK Sports Network about what she likes about UK.

## Quote of the Week 3:

"We love him. He goes hard for us, and we know we're gonna have his back. Each and every day, he's always bringing the energy — no matter what the ups and downs we've been through this year. We're always staying positive, and he's just coming in with a positive mindset to win each and every game that we play," UK senior guard Denzel Aberdeen on coach Mark Pope.

"You think she can be more and she can but it has to happen organically. She is a quiet kid by nature, so she has grown into this role."

"She has always been a lead by example player. Now she is talking more and has the respect of teammates. She is also one of the smartest basketball players I have ever coached and is learning to communicate all that information to her teammates. I still think she is in a really good position to lead our team."

Strack broke her own single season blocked shot record this season and became the first UK player to have consecutive seasons with 70 or more blocks. She has averaged a double-double this season but also improved her passing and 3-point shot.

"She is the best center in the country. There I said it," Brooks said. "She has the stats to prove it. There are a lot of centers out there who dominate in one area, maybe two. Clara is an offensive threat, double digits in rebounding, one of the top shot blockers in the country, one of the best passing post players in the country and she can play 35 to 37 minutes (per game)."

"She is the anchor of our defense. She is the one back there barking and telling everybody where they need to be and what they need to do. We are much better because of it. We are very fortunate that we do have her."

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Kentucky gymnastics will host a NCAA regional April 2-3-5 in Memorial Coliseum with tickets going on sale March 4th; "I'm excited for the crowd. It's going to be packed in there," junior gymnast Cecily Rizo, who won her first all-around title against Georgia last week, said.

Freshman Gabby Van Frayen, who has two beam titles and one on bars this season, will be competing in her first regional.

"I am just excited it will be at home in a place that I am now comfortable," she said.

Rizo believes hosting the regional is an advantage because Kentucky will be competing on equipment it has been on all season.

"When you go somewhere new, you're only on that equipment one time, and so you really have to adjust very quickly," Rizo said. "So being able to be on that same equipment really helps you settle in and kind of calms those nerves that you might have had somewhere else."

Van Frayen said every arena is different and can have unique lighting and that some mats might have a "little more squish" than other mats.

Junior Delaynee Rodriguez, who ranks in the top five nationally in the all-around and has 13 event wins this season, confirms the "home equipment" is an edge.

"A beam is a beam and yes it's four inches wide but I think sometimes they feel different. Sometimes they're more slippery. Sometimes they're rounded on the sides," Rodriguez said. "Even on bars if you pull the cables too tight, the bars feel tight or maybe feel slippery."

"When you go to different equipment and different gyms, it just might feel a little bit different. You have to adjust that. That's just the sport. I think at least for me, and I think most of our girls, when you're on your own equipment, it's just like, 'I've been on this equipment multiple times, I've hit good routines on this same exact bar multiple times, I'm going to be good.' I think it's more of a mental thing but it really is a big deal."

Rizo also believes the home crowd helps uplift the UK gymnasts.

"I feel like whenever Kentucky comes out, everyone is cheering and they are so excited to watch us compete and see a good competition. They're so fully invested and want to see us succeed," Rizo said.



Matt Ponatoski threw for over 10,000 yards and 118 touchdowns in high school but made it clear to recruiters that he wanted to play baseball in college also.