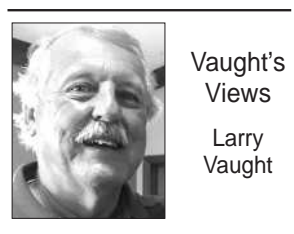


Clara Strack could be best superstar Brooks has coached



Vaught's Views
Larry Vaught



Coach Kenny Brooks believes Clara Strack is the "best center" in the country and that's why he likes UK's chances in NCAA Tournament play. (Vicky Graff Photo)

With the way she plays, Clara Strack is going to win awards.

Kentucky coach Kenny Brooks believes his 6-foot-5 junior is the nation's best center and she has the numbers to back up her coach's belief.

"Obviously, you want to be the best you can be and live up to your potential but awards are never on my mind," said Strack. "I love every single one of my teammates. I think that we have an outstanding group of people that I get to spend every day with, and I honestly wouldn't want another group of people to be with."

"I think that what we have and what we can be is really special. Everyone is on the same page, and I think that we can make a long run, and I'm excited to do it with these people around me."

Strack was the 2025 Southeastern Conference Defensive Player of the Year after transferring from Virginia

Tech to Kentucky when Brooks left Tech for UK. She has broken the UK single season blocks record two straight years and should be UK's all-time leading shot blocker when her career ends. She's already on the verge of joining UK's top 10 list in career rebounds after two seasons with 661. She is already in the top 10 in single season scoring (563 points,

ninth) and rebounding (331 rebounds, sixth) "Clara is developing into a leader. Knowing her and knowing just her personality, she's the type of player that does not want to disappoint me. Doesn't want to disappoint anyone," Brooks said. "I know we go through different stages with athletics and whatnot, but because I know her and because our rela-

tionship is so strong, I know what buttons to push with her.

"She's a coach's dream because you can coach that way because she knows everything that I'm doing to her is for her, and it's going to come from a place of love. Before it's over with, she probably will be the best superstar that I ever coached."

Kentucky point guard Tonie Morgan, a Georgia Tech transfer, broke the UK single season assists record set by Georgia Amooore last season. Many of Morgan's assists were scores by Strack. "She makes my life a lot easier. She makes my job very easy. I think everybody says it in the locker room. She's the best player — best post player in the country," Morgan said.

Opposing teams have tried double or even triple teaming Strack to disrupt her with physical play. Brooks feels some games she has been "mauled" but Strack has not let the extra attention impact the way she plays. She is averaging 17.1 points, 10 rebounds and 2.5 blocks per game

"You just have to play through stuff like that. I think probably the scout on me is I am not

as big as some people (so be physical). I have to use my advantages against their advantages," Strack said. "They might be able to push me around but I have length and touch. I have to rely on those and not worry too much about what teams are doing to me and beat them with my strengths."

Her strengths were on full display in the SEC Tournament last week when she hit five 3-pointers in a 33-point performance against Georgia. She became the first SEC player 6-foot-5 or taller ever to hit that many 3's in a game. Strack is also only the second SEC player — Tennessee superstar Candace Parker was first — to have at least 1,000 points, 600 rebounds, 150 blocks, 125 assists and 50 steals in their first two seasons in the SEC. If that's not enough, she is the only Division I women's player in the last 23 years to have 64 points, 26 rebounds, eight blocks, six made 3's and 57 percent shooting from the field in a conference tournament.

Kentucky is now waiting to see what the NCAA Tournament selection committee will do when pairings are announced Sunday.

Kentucky hosted NCAA games last year but Brooks said no matter where UK is seeded or plays, he's confident he has a team that can do well in March Madness with Strack anchoring the offense and defense

"We are tough. Clara is one of the toughest players in the country, she will battle anybody," Brooks said. "Teonni Key will battle anybody. Amelia Hassett will battle anybody. We are a tough team. We have the best center in the country. We will go rebound and that is what gives us an opportunity to play with anybody."

Strack feels the same way about Kentucky's postseason chances.

"Obviously we have had a few different things that we've been through. We had to re-identify ourselves a few times now, but I think that just makes you stronger, makes you better," Strack said.

"Getting through adversity makes you better prepared for life. I definitely think the goal is to just be playing our best basketball in March because that is when it matters.

Knowing that we have the people and pieces to play with anybody, I think our best basketball is ahead of us."

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