

Final Four

Another 'no' to the pros

Pitino stresses it again: He's happy at Kentucky

By Bruce Pascoe
The Arizona Daily Star

INDIANAPOLIS — The money will keep talking. Another Kentucky championship game tonight, despite injuries and the departure of four NBA draftees, made certain of it.

Rick Pitino just doesn't understand why people think he's still listening.

Didn't he have enough proof already? Everything about his decision to spurn yet another NBA job last summer, except for the fact that it was the New Jersey Nets making the offer, indicated he was serious about life in Lexington, Ky.

the lure of money wasn't enough. So when the inevitable questions about NBA coaching offers arose yesterday at an NCAA Dome news conference, Pitino bristled somewhat.

"What would be the motive to go somewhere else?" Pitino said. "That's the whole thing. You know how big Kentucky is, and why would a coach go to the pros? I think you know Kentucky pays me well enough to stay at Kentucky."

Besides, Pitino didn't exactly need a new challenge. He craved

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Rick Pitino
Yesterday at NCAA Dome

one at 7 a.m. the morning after the Wildcats won last year's national championship.

He forced his entire staff to wake up just hours after the celebrating ended, assembled the staff members together and told them they all needed to work harder.

They laughed. He was serious.

"I believe in this adage: If it's not broken, break it," Pitino said. "In other words, if you have a system, and it's not broken — if it's working well — I believe the following year you must break it and make that system better. Because your competitors will."

But last spring, Pitino didn't want to break much of anything, self-destructing already.

Tom Delle, Walter McCarty, Mark Pope and Antoine Walker were taken by the NBA last summer, and that was only part that Pitino expected.

In January, the Wildcats lost Derek Anderson, a second-team All-SEC pick, to a torn anterior cruciate ligament. Then, during the SEC Tournament earlier this month, guard/forward Allen Edwards was lost to a hairline fracture in his right ankle during the SEC Tournament.

Edwards is back on a limited back, and Anderson shot a couple of technicals on Saturday, when Pitino fulfilled a promise to get Anderson back in action somehow in Anderson's last year of eligibility.

It was the kind of promise you make in a close coach-player relationship, the kind that might not happen in the NBA. Pitino said he had been looking out for Anderson and his injury all season.

"I do feel like (Anderson) is a son to me. In that his future is in my hands, and I'm his guardian away from his immediate family," Pitino said. "You just don't have that feeling in the NBA. Although I was very close with Patrick Ewing, Jackson and Oskay, I was not their guardian. They considered their agent more of a guardian. I was their coach."

"This is a very warm feeling you have when you know you spent four years with (senior guard) Anthony Epps, and you've been through the mill with him and (senior forward) Jared Prickett."

not last year's team. They don't have the four draft picks. They give us a litany of things we don't have. And they were right," Pitino said.

"They were not trying to rub salt in our wounds. We said 'You're right.' You can always pick-hole the weaknesses. We shrunk them down the size of a pea. We're a great defensive team. We feed off each other."

"We have a lot of intangibles because they put on that Kentucky jersey, and they want to live up to that standard of excellence. We know who we're not, but we also know who we are."

Without Anderson, Pitino tried a lineup that included Edwards at shooting guard and senior Anthony Epps as the only returning starter from the 1996 title team — at the point.



Pitino enjoys guiding young players such as Jared Prickett (32)

RUNNING UP THE SCORE

Highest scoring NCAA championship games:

Year	Points	Final score
1975	177	UCLA 92, Kentucky 85
1982	278	UNLV 103, Duke 73
1985	371	UCLA 91, Michigan 86

long Pitino will continue to effectively purchase those warm moments by turning down NBA dollars is uncertain.

The only thing for sure is that the longer Pitino stays, the longer Kentucky is likely to keep winning, no matter how many NBA Mercers leave early for the NBA, no matter how many Derek Andersons get hurt.

With a win over Arizona tonight, Pitino gets a second straight national championship. He's only been at Kentucky eight years. He's only 44.

Nobody knows how far it could go. Pitino won't try to guess, either. Not publicly, anyway.

"People like myself who are still learning the game of basketball and still working to be better should never look at a place in history," Pitino said. "All they should do is live in the present and be the best they can be. Maybe someday when you raise to a level of a Dean Smith, you could think back and say maybe you should have been a small part of it."

The adversity has left Kentucky a little less secure than last season, when it threw waves of talent while running 18-1.

"Last year's team had a swagger. They knew they were great. This team doesn't know it," Pitino said.

They have to go out and work hard and show they are great."

Sophomore Wagner Turner moved into the starting lineup because of Edwards' back injury, pushing Epps to shooting guard. In eight games as a starter, Turner has averaged 12.8 points, 4.3 assists and 1.8 turnovers in 30.8 minutes a game.

In the same stretch, walk-on guard Cameron Mills has averaged 11.9 points and made 25

REPEAT CHAMPIONS

Team	Year
Oakland	1948, 49
Kentucky	1948, 49
San Francisco	1955, 56
Oconnell	1961, 62
UCLA	1964, 65
UCLA	1967, 72
Duke	1991, 92

Common opponents with UCLA: Utah and College of Charleston. Kentucky beat both, as did Arizona. Pitino's team defeated the likes 72-59 in the West Regional final and College of Charleston in the Great Alaska Shootout final 82-65.

Just the facts: Kentucky will be to become only the second team in the last 24 years to repeat as national champions. Duke repeated its title in 1992. The Wildcats won consecutive championships in 1948 and 1949. Ron Mercer, who is NBA-bound, became the 43rd Kentucky player to score history to record 1,000 points when he tallied 19 against Minnesota on Saturday. He's the 11th Wildcat to surpass the 1,000 mark in only two years.

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GIANT KILLERS

If Arizona beats Kentucky tonight, it will become the first team since the NCAA began seeding men's basketball tournaments in 1975 to have beaten three No. 1 seeds. Only four, counting this year's Wildcats, have beaten two.

A history of champions since 1979 and the No. 1 seeds they beat en route to the title:

Year	Champion and its seed	No. 1 seeds beaten
1979	Michigan State (2)	Notre Dame, Indiana (5)
1980	Louisville (2)	Louisiana State
1981	Indiana (3)	Louisiana State
1982	North Carolina (1)	Georgetown
1983	North Carolina State (6)	Virginia, Houston
1984	Georgia Tech (1)	Kentucky
1985	Villanova (8)	Michigan, Georgetown
1986	Louisville (2)	Duke
1987	Indiana (1)	UNLV
1988	Kansas (6)	Oklahoma
1989	Michigan (3)	Illinois
1990	UNLV (1)	Iowa
1991	Duke (2)	UNLV
1992	Duke (1)	Iowa
1993	North Carolina (1)	Michigan
1994	Akronian (1)	Norve
1995	Akronian (1)	Norve
1996	Kentucky (1)	Massachusetts

Wildcats

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ed against teams that press Georgetown, Arkansas, Cincinnati and Iowa fall victim to the Wildcats last year.

North Carolina went bust in one of its attempts to press Arizona on Saturday. With 7:24 remaining in the first half, the Tar Heels tried a man-to-man press. But Bibby received the ball, drove down the middle of the court and passed to Simon for an easy jumper.

The time it took to score the basket: four seconds.

"Right now, there's no question in my mind that our press system is to win. We've got to keep them off guard without a steady state of any defense."

"We don't have to do it all the time. We're going to have to mix up our defenses and make sure our system is to win. We've got to keep them off guard without a steady state of any defense."

So, in psychological terms, the UA has turned the tables on Kentucky. Arizona does not appear to be concerned. It looks as the Kentucky is wary about the UA's ability to break the press.

Arizona has struggled against a full-court press late in games against Kansas and Providence. But as Bibby said, "that happens when we had the pressure

performed at the Nike summer camp for high school prospects. Mercer and Simon played on opposite teams in the Top 50 games, which also included Eric Garmon."

Pitino said he knew he had a thoroughbred on a scouting trip to Nashville, Tenn., during Mercer's sophomore year in high school.

"I saw a young man with terrific genes, a young man who could run, explode and score," Pitino said.

"He had an interesting shot at that time. He had a knockball there, literally, the ball was suspended in air. It never rotated. I knew he was going to have to work on that more than anything else."

Mercer paid attention. He had his best career game — 30 points (on 13-of-16 shooting), seven rebounds, four assists, three steals — in The House That Michael Built, the United Center in Chicago, in a 101-87 victory over Purdue in the Great Eight on Dec. 4.

"On a college level, I'd say it was a Michael Jordan performance," Pitino said.

Kentucky dressed in the Bulls' locker room, but out of respect continued off Jordan's locker with tape.

UA guard Miles Simon remembers Mercer as a Jortan-esque

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THE LAST LAUGH

Teams with most losses to win the NCAA championship:

Team	Year	Record
Kansas	1988	27-11
Villanova	1985	25-10
N. Carolina State	1983	26-10
Indiana	1981	26-9
Marquette	1977	25-7
Duke	1991	27-7
Michigan	1989	30-7
Louisville	1986	30-2

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Kentucky

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pep band during the 1996 NCAA championship game victory over Syracuse after suffering a left knee injury the summer before.

There was no room on the bench. This year there was plenty, what with the injuries and the loss of four starters to the NBA — Antoine Walker, Walter McCarty, Tom Delle and Mark Pope.

But Kentucky has gained resolve from those who point out, correctly, that this team is not as talented as last year's. A point Uah, made before absorbing a 72-60 defeat in the West Regional final.

"Uah came out and told us exactly who we were. They're

not last year's team. They don't have the four draft picks. They give us a litany of things we don't have. And they were right," Pitino said.

"They were not trying to rub salt in our wounds. We said 'You're right.' You can always pick-hole the weaknesses. We shrunk them down the size of a pea. We're a great defensive team. We feed off each other."

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FINAL TWO AT A GLANCE

Arizona

Record: 24-9
Seed: No. 4, Southeast Regional.
Bid: At-large (Pac-10).
Coach: Lute Olson, 340-110, 14th year.
332-202, 24 years overall.
Championship appearances: First.
Titles: None.
Road to the championship: Beat South Alabama 65-57, College of Charleston 73-69, Kansas 85-82, Providence 86-92 in quarters, and North Carolina 66-58.

Series record vs. Kentucky: 0-2, with last meeting on Dec. 23, 1993. Kentucky won 83-92 at the buzzer in the championship of the Maui Classic.
Series vs. Wildcats in the NCAA Tournament: First meeting. Kentucky beat the UA 77-53 in the NF 1 in 1949.

Just the facts: The Wildcats are trying to become the first team to beat three No. 1 seeds en route to the championship. They have beaten Kansas and North Carolina, when each of those houses like Kentucky. The Wildcats are 8-1 on a neutral court this year, including wins over North Carolina (twice), Utah, Tulane and Kansas. Their loss

Kentucky

Record: 35-4
Seed: No. 1, West Regional.
Bid: SEC champion.
Coach: Rick Pitino (219-49), eighth year; 352-120, 15 years overall.
Championship appearances: None.
Titles: Six, in 1948, 1949, 1951, 1988, 1978 and 1996.
Road to championship: Beat Montana 92-64, Iowa 75-69, St. Joseph's 83-68, Utah 72-50 and Mercer 73-69.

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