

University of Kentucky Alumni Association

KENTUCKY

Alumni

SUMMER 2014



Final Four: Cats find magic in March!



What a ride!

After an up-and-down season,
Wildcats find magic in March!

By Kelli Elam



Photo: Dr. Michael Huang

Aaron Harrison nails a long 3-pointer against Wisconsin to send the Wildcats to the national championship game.

While the journey came up one win short of the perfect ending, the 2013-14 UK men's basketball team took the Big Blue Nation on an incredible journey all the way to the national championship game. Despite falling to Connecticut 60-54 in the title game, the Wildcats certainly made it a March (and April) to remember, defeating No. 9 seed Kansas State, No. 1 seed Wichita State, No. 4 seed and defending national champion Louisville and No. 2 seed Michigan to claim the Midwest Region and advance to the Final Four for the 16th time in school history. UK defeated Wisconsin in the national semifinals to advance to the title game.

"Well, really, I can't tell you ... even in that loss ... I can't believe what these guys got done together," said UK Coach John Calipari after the championship game. "Talking about a bunch of young kids that just went out there and believed in each other and just kept fighting."

When asked how he would remember the "magic" of the tournament run, freshman James Young, who led UK with 20 points, said it was the fight in the team.

"That we really fought, no matter what, no matter how much we were down," Young said. "We just kept our heads up and just kept fighting for each other."

Freshman Julius Randle shared the sentiment. "This group of guys is special," he said. "We have been through a lot this season. How we kept fighting and we were able to make this run just says a lot about the guys. I just hate that it ended like this."

"Fight" was something the Wildcats certainly showed during the tournament run. Although, it could be argued that the run actually began after the regular season ended and before the start of the SEC Tournament in Atlanta. After falling at Florida 85-64 in the regular season finale, the "tweaking" began and so did the team's inspired play. UK defeated LSU, then Georgia to earn a third game with the Gators. The Cats stormed back on an 18-0 run in the second half, and had a chance to win it, but

were unable to get a shot off as time expired, falling 61-60. In defeat, however, the young Cats proved something to themselves and everyone else — they could make a tournament run.

UK earned the No. 8 seed in the Midwest Region, beginning tournament play in St. Louis against the No. 9 seed Wildcats from Kansas State. Kentucky saw its 12-point lead cut to two points early in the second half, but held on to grind out a 56-49 win to set up a matchup with No. 1 seed and undefeated Wichita State. "Great win for us," Calipari said after the game. "I am really proud of these guys. A little nerve-racking for them. A bunch of guys that have never been — not one of them — have even been in an NCAA Tournament game. So, I was pleased."

Randle led the way with 19 points and 15 rebounds. Aaron Harrison added 18 points.

"I just left the SEC Tournament behind me," Randle said. "Coach did a great job of taking things off my shoulders, told me not to worry about offense, let Andrew create for me. And Andrew made the game a lot easier for me, and I was able to get the ball in spots where it was a lot easier for me to score."

In the 35-0 Shockers, UK would face a team, ironically given the 40-0 preseason hype that surrounded the Cats, looking to keep an undefeated season alive. In a game billed as one of the best round of 32 matchups in tournament history, the Wildcats turned in a performance that was one of the best of the tournament, winning 78-76.

"This was an Elite Eight game," the Kentucky coach said after the game. "The winner of this should have gone to the Final Four. That's what this was."

Wichita State led 37-31 at halftime, and then proceeded to start the second half with a three pointer. An 8-0 run by Kentucky set up a fantastic finish as the teams exchanged blows until the final horn sounded. There were three ties and 14 lead changes. Young nailed a 3-pointer to put UK in front 73-71



UK's Julius Randle scores against Connecticut's DeAndre Daniels in the championship game.

Photo: Victoria Graff

with 1:41 left to play. Freshman Andrew Harrison, who was questionable to play due to an elbow injury suffered against Kansas State, hit three free throws in the final 42 seconds. In total, UK made 11-of-14 free throws over the final 4:52 of the game. Still, a miss on a second free-throw attempt with 7.2 seconds remaining gave the Shockers a chance to keep their perfect season alive. However, when the three-point attempt by Fred VanVleet bounced off the back of the rim, the Wildcats were headed to the Sweet Sixteen for the fourth time in five years under Calipari.

“Heck of a game,” he said. “Really proud of our guys for hanging in there and fighting. They never gave up. Wichita State never gave up and had their last chance to win it. Just proud of the guys.”

Andrew Harrison led the Cats with 20 points, despite the sore elbow.

“I wasn’t going to play at first, but I felt like I just had to. And I fought through it,” he said.

Kentucky faced a familiar foe in the Sweet Sixteen, meeting the Louisville Cardinals in Indianapolis. The Wildcats defeated Louisville 73-66 in December at Rupp Arena. Much more than state bragging rights were on the line for this one. For most of the game, it appeared that Louisville would avenge the early season loss, leading by as much as 13 and by seven with just 4:33 left to play. Down 66-59, UK ended the game with a 15-3 run to earn the 74-69 win and advance to meet No. 2 seed Michigan in the Midwest Region final.

Calipari knew this one would be a battle and tried to prepare the team before tipoff.

“I told them before the game, you’ll get punched in the mouth and you will taste blood,” he said. “You’re going to fight or brace for the next shot. They fought. They never stopped playing.”

With the Cats down one point, Aaron Harrison drained a 3-pointer with 39.1 seconds left to play to permanently wrestle the lead away. Center Willie Cauley-Stein left the game at the 13:05 mark in the first half with a foot injury and did not return. He would be out for the rest of the tournament. Freshman Dakari Johnson finished with a career-high 15 points and six rebounds.

“The team has fought the whole year,” Calipari added after the win. “They’re maturing right before our eyes.”

Only the Michigan Wolverines stood between Kentucky and the program’s 16th trip to the Final Four. The regional final provided another heart-stopping game and more late heroics by Aaron Harrison. With the score tied, Aaron Harrison nailed another game-winning three, this one with 2.6 seconds left to play to give the Cats the 75-72 lead. When Michigan’s long attempt for the tie failed, Kentucky was headed back to the Final Four for the third time in four seasons. The No. 1 preseason team that had struggled through an up and down season found itself right where everyone predicted: headed to Dallas.

“Well, again, I just coached a game, and these guys just played,” Calipari said afterward. “We don’t know if it was another classic kind of game, but I’ll tell you this: They weren’t going to go away and neither were we.”

Kentucky was in a position to win thanks in large part to the contributions of reserve freshman Marcus Lee and sophomore

James Young drives against Louisville’s Stephan Van Treese during the Sweet Sixteen matchup.



Photo: Victoria Graff



Photos: Victoria Graff

Alex Poythress. With Cauley-Stein out, Lee kept the Cats in it by scoring 10 points, including four put back dunks. Poythress added eight points. After trailing by as many as 10 in the first half, Kentucky battled back to tie it up at halftime. The second half was another must-see game. The teams battled to a 72-72 tie with just 27 seconds remaining. Aaron Harrison created space near the top of the key and delivered another knock-out three with the Michigan defender contesting the shot.

“Andrew gave me a hand-off, and I kind of fumbled it,” Aaron Harrison said. “I had to get control of the ball back, and I tried to create some space. He (LeVert) was up on me. He touched my hand a little bit, actually. And the shot just fell, so ...”

“He’s (Aaron) not afraid to miss,” Calipari said. “That’s the whole thing about making those kind of plays. You can’t be afraid to miss. If I do miss, I’m making the next one, and I will shoot the next one.”

Aaron Harrison finished with 12 points, all scored on 3-pointers made in the last 8 minutes of the game. Randle led the Cats with 16 points and 11 rebounds.

“We showed a lot of toughness. We’re just a group of tough young guys, doesn’t matter about the age or anything anymore. We just try to go out and fight and keep our heads down and swing the whole game, and we just fight so hard,” Aaron Harrison added.

The Wisconsin Badgers, the No. 2 seed and winner of the West Region, presented another formidable challenge for the Cats. The game turned out to be another heart-stopper as UK pulled out a thrilling 74-73 win to advance to the championship game.

Afterward, Calipari simply said, “Another great game.”

Indeed, it was a great game. As was the script for the tournament, Kentucky fell behind early but battled back to pull within four, 40-36, at halftime. The Badgers opened the second half with a 3-pointer. After a timeout, UK went on a 15-0 run for a 51-43 lead. Wisconsin responded with a 15-4 run of its own for a 58-55 lead with 10:51 left to play. The teams traded punches the rest of the way.

Of course, it came down to the final seconds and Aaron Harrison. Wisconsin went up 73-71 after Traevon Jackson hit two of three free throws with 16.4 left. With the clock racing toward zero, Aaron Harrison nailed his third clutch 3-pointer of the tournament with 5.7 left. The Badgers last shot attempt was off the mark, giving UK the win and earning a date in the last game of the college basketball season.

“We played seven freshmen, folks,” Calipari said. “We played seven freshmen.”

The run that was unimaginable in February ended one win short of the title, as Shabazz Napier led the Huskies to a 60-54 win. As in the previous four tournament games, UK fell behind early and battled back. The Cats were down 30-15 in the first half, but closed the gap to 35-31 by halftime. UK got as close as one point, but could never manage to get over the hump and grab the lead.

Following the run to the NCAA national championship game, Randle and Young elected to enter the NBA Draft as expected. Cauley-Stein, Poythress, Aaron Harrison, Andrew Harrison, Johnson and Lee decided to bypass the draft for another season in Lexington. Returnees Dominique Hawkins and Derek Willis will also join the nation’s No. 2 ranked recruiting class. ■

UK’s Alex Poythress scored eight points off the bench against the Wolverines.

Photo: Victoria Graff



Coach John Calipari directs the Wildcats against Wichita State in St. Louis. UK defeated the No. 1 seed Shockers 78-76.

Photo: Victoria Graff



The Wildcats emerged from the brutally tough Midwest Region to earn a trip to the Final Four.