



Kentucky Basketball: A SWOT Analysis Post-Bahamas

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Kentucky's Big Blue Bahamas tour told us a lot about who this year's team is, and what it could become.

With the Big Blue Bahamas tour now firmly in the rear-view mirror, it's time to take a look at all the things that we learned about the Kentucky Wildcats 2014-15 team from those contests. It will be a while before we see Kentucky in action again, and when we do it will be practices and exhibitions.

We'll be taking this analysis from the business concept of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). While the concept doesn't quite apply perfectly, it does help us categorize the analysis into matrix groups that can be dealt with straightforwardly. Also, we won't be dealing with actual statistics that quantify each analysis in



judgments.

Strengths

Weaknesses

- Unbalanced athleticism — Kentucky this season is much more athletic in the front court than in the back court. That's unusual in college basketball, and requires Calipari & Co. to adjust for that. The twins are outstanding and athletic players, but their size works against them when faced with smaller, more athletic players, particularly in transition.
- 3-point shooting — This ought to be a strength considering Kentucky's run to the NCAA Tournament championship game last season, but that is belied by their performance in the Bahamas. Like last season's team, their shooting will get better as the season continues, but right now it must be considered a weakness.
- Free throw shooting — The charity stripe was problematic for Kentucky last season, and looks to be again this season, at least for the front-court



50% from the line, that by itself is inconsistent, and I'd be surprised if WCS or Trey Lyles comes in and shoots 70%. Add in the inexperience of Towns and Tyler Ulis, and you can bet that free throws are, at least today, a vulnerability.

- Defensive rebounding — Kentucky did not rebound the ball well defensively in the Bahamas. Their offensive rebounding was also a little suspect, but last year's team was absolutely dominant in the DR department and there is no reason why this year's team should not be. The addition of WCS and Lyles will probably help in this area, but right now, we have to consider this a weakness based on what we saw.
- Free throw rate — In the Bahamas, Kentucky shot remarkably few free throws. Some of this can be attributed to the platoon system and the way the games were called (i.e. very permissively for contact). However, I still would have expected free throw rates in the high 30's, and we didn't see that.

Part of the problem was Ulis, who prefers to attack the defense with ball movement rather



going to be a great shooter as a freshman — that's something that has to be learned against college competition, and he's a little tentative about getting in the lane right now among "all those gargantuans," as *The Waterboy's* mama would say. Calipari will no doubt help him get over that, because he needs to get fouled and get to the line.

- Lack of an athletic slasher — We got used to seeing that guy over the last two seasons in the person of Archie Goodwin and last year, James Young. There is nothing that can put more pressure on the defense than an athletic wing slasher. We had hoped that Poythress could have developed that part of his game, but so far he hasn't. Devin Booker showed surprising athletic ability in the Bahamas, but slashing just isn't his game, or wasn't in high school. If he can develop that talent, then this won't be a problem, but you need that guy to get you shots at crunch time and draw fouls. Dominique Hawkins showed some signs of that kind of game, but more as a cutter than a slasher.

Opportunities



of a once in four years foreign tour is was a huge opportunity for this years team. It measurably toughened the team back in 2010-11 and produced the emergence of Josh Harrellson as a major team component, something few of us would have ever imagined.

This year, Coach Cal has taken advantage of this rare opportunity in a way that was unprecedented at Kentucky or any other school in terms of its intensity and quality of competition. It was so bad at the end that the team was obviously in distress, something that will serve them very well in the season. They have now been there, together, and they know what it means to compete under duress, tired and lacking their full capabilities. That experience is invaluable.

They also got to compete against full-grown men who play the game for a living, guys who were physical, tough, and skilled. That they were able to match that physicality indicates they will not, like some other UK teams have (I'm looking at you, 2013), quail in the face of a large, physical opponent of upperclassmen.



to be good enough or tough enough to go undefeated against the likes of the Kansas Jayhawks, the Texas Longhorns, the North Carolina Tar Heels, the UCLA Bruins and the Louisville Cardinals.

One or more of those teams is going to hand the Wildcats a loss, in all probability. But this schedule gives UK an excellent foundation for the league schedule, and by the time they get there, with the experience of the Bahamas and pre-conference under their belts along with Camp Cal, they should be about as battle-tested as any team in history entering SEC play.

- A stronger, but not too strong SEC schedule — Kentucky doesn't face the crazy gym design of Memorial Gym in Nashville this season, gets only one game against what promises to be a very good, maybe second-only-to UK LSU Tigers team, and closes with the Florida Gators in Lexington rather than in Gainesville. They also get the Arkansas Razorbacks, another talented team only once, in Rupp. I see only four decent chances at a loss on this schedule; at Florida, at



It's likely for UK to lose more than two of those four games, and possibly one unexpected loss somewhere else. The rest of them should be manageable (Yes, South Carolina fan, I see your hand up out there. Not this season).

Yes, dear Wildcats fan, I know that this is a generally pessimistic outlook, and it is possible that the battle-tested UK team runs through the SEC like fecal matter through a canebrake.

Having lived through last season, I prefer to be on the cautious side this year, even though I was just as excited as anyone about the Bahamas performance.

- A high pre-season ranking — it's always better to be ranked high early in the season. Last year's unprecedented collapse and subsequent resurgence does nothing to disabuse me of this notion. This team should be able to stay in the top ten all season, which greatly increases the chance for a high seed, which notwithstanding last year's remarkable heroics, is still a much better place from which to launch an assault on the NCAA Tournament championship.



- Injuries to either Andrew Harrison or Tyler Ulis — Ulis was a revelation in the Bahamas, but we don't want to play any substantial part of this season without either Ulis or Andrew. We are most definitely thinnest in the back court, particularly at the point guard spot. Yes, I know Aaron and Hawkins can play this spot, but we need both Ulis and Andrew healthy, they are the players we can least afford to lose — Andrew most of all.
- Unexpected strength from the SEC — the SEC looks fairly benign this season, but there are several teams who look average on paper that are a threat to rise up and do damage, namely Alabama and South Carolina. Both have fine coaches that have been running against the tide for a couple of years and need some success. Don't fall asleep on those teams.
- Kids being kids — Just because we had some unity in Nassau doesn't mean it will continue indefinitely. Some guys on this team are going to see some serious time on the pine, and how well that will be tolerated is anybody's guess. Dissent



gays could get themselves suspended due to poor classroom performance, acting out and getting caught at a misdemeanor, or flunk a whiz quiz. Just because it hasn't happened in the last five years doesn't mean it can't.

- Swell-headedness — early success can lead to overconfidence, and on a team this loaded, that's a genuine threat. I thought I saw some of that creep in during the last game against Chalons-Reims, although in retrospect, I might have mistaken fatigue for impudence.

Summing it all up

This Kentucky Wildcats team showed us some things in the Bahamas, most of them good but a few of them less so, such as 3-point shooting and defensive rebounding. Those areas need some attention before we get into the season, and I'm sure that Calipari will attend to those with his typical vigor and intensity.

This team is **potentially** the best one to take the court at Kentucky in my lifetime, but in order to reach that potential, these young men must pull themselves out of their comfort zone and exceed what they believe they can



that will serve the Wildcats well when the season arrives, but their play, as good as it looked at times, was not good enough. To be fair, in August, it should not be good enough. They will improve if they recognize that size and talent, while important, pale in comparison to leveraging the team aspect of basketball. They have to learn that it isn't always selfish to take the shot, and that passing can be just as selfish as trying to take **every** shot. Recognizing the difference is not as easy as it's often made out to be.

Having recent experience with teams that "look good on paper," we'll be approaching this one with more caution and less hype, although I do think plenty of optimism and excitement is warranted. But any number of things can, and some will, go wrong during the long college season. How Kentucky handles the challenges that arise will define them as a team. There will be games where the shots don't fall, and the opponent brings his A+ game. Winning those will be hard, but they are a critical component of developing from a collection of talent to a college basketball team that has the eye of the tiger (or Wildcat, in this case).

In summary, the Big Blue Nation has a lot to look forward to this season, and much to be excited about. This group looks like a nightmare for all but the most talented and



them are quite as deep as Kentucky. How Sampson uses this depth, and the level of performance he can extract from them, will go far to inform this coming season's success. The talent is there, the depth is there, and to a Kentucky extent at least, the experience is there. That's all the pieces you need for a championship season.

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