

Voted Kentucky's best weekly Sports Column



**"Big Red Bird Flies toward Eastern Kentucky"**

By Derek Fugate  
Times-Voice Sports  
Photos: Derek Fugate



Hey Card fans! Louisville bounced back over Boston College Saturday after losing to Duke last Tuesday, but struggled without **Mikel Brown Jr.** and **Ryan Conwell**. Now, Louisville awaits its most important home game of the season this Tuesday as the Cards face No. 16 Virginia. Why is this game so significant you ask? Because this may very well be the last AP Top-25 team Louisville will face at the *KFC Yum! Center* this season. (Louisville does play North Carolina, but only on the road this season)

Looking at the current Basketball Net Rankings, Louisville only has two Quad-1 wins with an opportunity for another with Virginia tomorrow. The next opportunity would be at Duke Jan. 26, which at Cameron Indoor would be a very hard task. With the ACC still down, there isn't many chances remaining for these quality wins. Louisville fans will eventually understand the impact of the road losses at both Arkansas and Tennessee come selection Sunday.

As far as the injuries go, I highly doubt **Brown Jr.** will even play another game this season, as he's currently projected as a lottery pick in the 2026 NBA Draft. **Brown Jr.** is still experiencing back spasms and pain and is simply not 100% ready to go. **Conwell** hurt his knee in practice and is



**Adrian Wooley takes over as point guard**

day-to-day. **Conwell** is averaging a team-high 19.9 points per game and shooting 40.8%. There is no doubt he will be missed if not 100% ready to go against Virginia.

Virginia has always been Louisville's Kryptonite, but this isn't the Virginia team you've become familiar with. With new Head Coach **Ryan Odom**, the Cavaliers are now a high-offensive team that still plays tremendous defense. I watched Virginia dominate NC State the other day on television up 40-20 at halftime, and this was at NC State!

The Cavaliers went on to win 76-61. Virginia doesn't get the respect that Duke and North Carolina get in the ACC, but that could change with a road win at the Yum! Center and could be the break-thru

the Cavaliers need to propel into the Top-10 and be considered a true contender.

You'll also notice this week in the AP Top-25 that the "Bucket's getting full." This pretty much means that teams are getting locked in where they are. A bad loss or quality win doesn't really move a team much from here on out. For example, Louisville took a bad home loss to Duke and struggled to defeat 176 RPI Boston College while remaining No. 20 in the rankings. This can surely help teams with bad losses but is also unfortunate for teams on the outside looking in with quality wins. The foundation has been set, so "It is what it is."

Because of this theory, Louisville could still lose several games while remaining in the rankings, but seeding may look very different when the rankings come NCAA Tournament time, and this goes for non-ranked teams potentially getting a good seed as well. Go Cards!



**"Plus-Minus"**

By James David Fugate  
Times-Voice Sports  
Photos: Derek Fugate



One of two fires may better represent the hopes of Big Blue Nation (BBN) with Monday's news of losing point guard Jaland Lowe for the remainder of the season, such reporting promoting the prospects of an acrid dumpster fire now emerging as the better bet, more so than couches burning on State Street in April.

It's no secret that Kentucky is one of college basketball's most disappointing teams thus far this season after being ranked ninth in the preseason AP Poll, as opposed to not getting any votes in the most recent release Monday after compiling a 10-6 overall record and a 1-2 mark in the SEC. Making matters even worse and piling more highly flammable waste to the dumpster out back of Rupp is the Wildcats 1-5 record against ranked opponents.

Losing Lowe can only add concern BBN has that things may only get worse as the Cats dive a little deeper into SEC action. It's really unfair to lay all of this on Pope's doorstep, considering he's had to reconfigure his team due to a variety of injuries such as those also suffered by Jayden Quaintance, and Mouhamed Dioubate, which have caused them to miss much of the season.

The Cats will miss Lowe more than many realize based on his plus-minus, the measuring of a player's impact by tracking the net point difference for their team while they are on the court. A positive number means his team outscored opponents during his minutes played (good), while a negative number means



**Jaland Lowe drives to the basket**

the opponent outscored his team (bad). It reflects overall team performance rather than just individual scoring.

Lowe had a +32 plus-minus in the Wildcats' win over Mississippi State despite leaving the game early due to his shoulder injury. He had a +24 versus Indiana playing a big role in the Wildcats' 72-60 statement win. And then Lowe had +20 in Atlanta against St. John's, leading Kentucky in plus/minus off the bench, fueling the second-half comeback.

On the bright side, Lowe's likely replacement, freshman Jasper Johnson, had a +32 plus-minus against North Carolina and a +30 against Alabama. BBN hopes he'll be able to match that going forward, especially on the road in the SEC.

We'll know a little more

tonight (Wednesday) with the Cats' matchup with LSU, and considerably more Saturday in Knoxville, as Kentucky takes on Tennessee.

Regardless of how the season winds up, plus or minus, there's more than likely going to be smoke in April, one way or another, or yesterday's stars whose luster faded somewhere between their dorm room and the G-League, college basketball's all together a different universe, one to which many of BBN are just now awakening.

"What's wrong with Kentucky?" I heard one fan ask this week. I'm not sure it's a matter of right or wrong; although, I believe there's more wrong with college basketball than there is wrong with Kentucky basketball. But... there seems to be more "right" with the SEC than there is "right" with Kentucky at this point; and while that's quite all right for opposing SEC fans; it's not quite right for BBN.



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\*Kentucky State Study 2023; conducted by Coda Ventures