

Kentucky outlasts Duke in Atlanta to close out Champions Classic, 77-72

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports

It was a role reversal at State Farm Arena: for the first time in any game I can remember with my own brain, Kentucky was the old, experienced team on the floor.

It was Mark Pope's Wildcats, in his first high profile game as head coach, that outlasted Jon Scheyer's talented, young Blue Devils. Kentucky secured a rebound in the final seconds to close out an impressive victory over the SM 3rd ranked Duke team with high expectations.

Like it or not, the story of the game was Cooper Flagg. Flagg's line of 26 points, 12 rebounds, and 9-19 FG spot is impressive, and Flagg's play for a 17 year old freshman is astoundingly sublime. He is athletic and lanky, with plenty of moves in his bag, both in the post and out on the perimeter. Fellow freshman Kon Knueppel (14 pts, 5 rebs, 5-20 FG) had a quieter night compared to his first two games. Tyrese Proctor contributed 12 points and 3 assists, while big man Khaman Maluach (freshman from South Sudan) dropped 10 points and 7 rebounds with a perfect FG %.

Duke's bench ended up playing a role— as in a negative one. The Blue Devils went about 2 deep, with only Mason Gillis and Sion James combining for 6 total points. On the other hand, Kentucky played very similarly to the way Mark Pope's national title team did all those years ago. They didn't have one big star; they just played their roles and hit big shots when necessary. Andrew Carr (17 pts, 5 rebs, 2-3 3pt) led the way, while San Diego State transfer Lamont Butler gave 9 points with 4 assists. Otega Weh had 15 points and hit 2 three-pointers— not to mention the game-icing rebound over Cooper Flagg in the final seconds, which was one of 6 on the night. Sharp shooter Koby Brea (8 points, 4 rebs) also put in a serviceable 18 minutes for Kentucky.

All in all, Kentucky hit their shots, and Duke didn't. It is a simplified way to lay this one out, but collectively, Duke was a dismal 17.4% from beyond the arc, hitting just 4 threes the entire game. Kentucky hit 10, and shot 40% from the field all night. They went 9 or 10 deep on the bench, which cannot be said of Duke.

The game was close the whole way, with only one double digit lead (Duke by 10). It felt like a real Champions Classic game, and the back-and-forth nature produced some exciting moments.

There's no denying Cooper Flagg's ability, but his two turnovers in the final fifteen seconds reminded us that he is— take a breath, here— *17 years old*. Without a true playmaking point guard, the ball was in the hands of Flagg when the moment mattered most. Although he couldn't seal the deal, it showed he is (1) human; as well as (2) a developing young talent. Through the first three games of his career, Flagg is averaging 19 points, 10 rebounds, and 3 assists per game. He will certainly be sunken about the final phase of the game, but he will firmly be the guy for Duke going forward.

Duke should still be expected to fly, but the reality is, Kentucky had a huge win more than Duke had a huge loss. As aforementioned, Kentucky doesn't have a Cooper Flagg. They really don't have one guy you can point to and anoint as "the guy" for them. Perhaps it's to their benefit. Andrew Carr certainly had the best night, but it's likely not going to be him every single night. Pope's culture at Kentucky seems (in a small sample size) much sweeter and easier to take. While it's true John Calipari's time may have been up anyway in Lexington, Pope has done a great job turning the page to a new chapter after likely not being their first option. His team is older, more experienced, and more together than recent Wildcat teams. They aren't a team of individual stars; they are just a team.

For Duke and Kentucky, the hard road doesn't end here, of course. For two teams who have aspirations for March, the road really *begins* here. Both teams will be a part of the national conversation, and both teams will have marquee matchups to come. Kentucky will look to keep the train moving, and Duke will look to get back on the horse.

Duke's next game: vs. Wofford, Saturday 11/16, 12 pm EST, ACC Network

Kentucky's next game: vs. Lipscomb, Tuesday 11/19, 7 pm EST, ESPN+

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