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A Kentucky Star Makes His Talent Known With Every Point

By RAY GLIER

Orestes Meeks will not accept the notion that his son has come out of nowhere to be a star, that Jodie Meeks is somehow playing beyond his potential. The scoring prowess of Jodie Meeks, a junior at Kentucky, has gone from drip to pour, as if a spigot was suddenly turned wide open.

“Ask Billy Donovan, ask the other coaches in the Southeastern Conference if they are surprised by this,” Orestes Meeks said Friday in a telephone interview from Norcross, Ga. “They all recruited him. I know he’s been discounted by people, but he’s healthy now and we knew he would have a good year.”

Jodie Meeks, who averaged only 8 points a game in his first two years, opened the season by scoring 39 against [Virginia Military Institute](#). When he scored a team-record 54 against Tennessee in Knoxville on Jan. 13 in the Wildcats’ 90-72 victory, he leaped to the pedestal reserved for all-Americans like North Carolina’s Tyler Hansbrough and Davidson’s Stephen Curry.

On Tuesday night, Meeks hit an off-balance 3-pointer with four seconds to play that lifted the Wildcats (17-7, 6-3) to a 68-65 win over Florida. He scored 10 of Kentucky’s last 12 points and played all but 17 seconds.

Meeks, a 6-foot-4 swingman from the Atlanta area, leads the SEC in scoring, averaging 25 points a game, and ranks fourth nationally. He is an 89 percent free-throw shooter and hits 43.3 percent of his 3-point attempts, which also leads the SEC.

After being injured for most of last season with a sports hernia, Meeks has made a dramatic jump — from being regarded as a decent player to a candidate for national player of the year.

It is the kind of attention most players who were passed over for preseason all-American teams might cherish, but in a telephone interview Thursday, Meeks tried to muffle the celebrity that came with scoring outbursts.

“Maybe I was overlooked; that’s fine, that’s O.K.,” Meeks said. “I heard about the preseason teams and not getting on them and all that, but it didn’t bother me.

“The points are great for the program; it gets us some attention. I’m more worried about the wins.”

Meeks should not have to be so demure because Kentucky has been a program of star power with all-Americans from Ralph Beard to Dan Issel to Jack Givens to Sam Bowie to Kenny Walker to Ron Mercer to Tayshaun Prince. For decades, it was usual for the program to have a player with swagger whom its rabid fans adored.

The Wildcats, however, have not had a player named to the all-SEC first team by The Associated Press since Chuck Hayes in 2005. The Wildcats have not had a first-round pick in the [N.B.A. draft](#) since Jamaal Magloire in 2000 and they have not had a first-team A.P. all-American since Mercer in 1997.

One reason Kentucky fans became annoyed with the former coach [Tubby Smith](#) was they did not see him as an ambitious recruiter. Memphis, North Carolina, Kansas, [Ohio State](#), [Michigan State](#) and Florida were reeling in the kind of prized players the Wildcats were accustomed to signing in the eras of Adolph Rupp, Joe B. Hall, Eddie Sutton and [Rick Pitino](#).

Meeks, who was recruited by Smith, accounts for 32.4 percent of the Wildcats' offense, the highest percentage for any Kentucky player in the last 10 years. His emergence is restoring a tradition at Kentucky of sensational scorers dressed in blue.

Kentucky Coach Billy Gillespie ridiculed a television reporter at halftime of a recent game for suggesting the Wildcats were struggling because Meeks had scored only 6 points. Gillespie insisted Kentucky was more than a one-man team, which is perhaps why Meeks is sensitive to the issue of his shooting.

"If I am open, the coaches don't have a problem with me taking shots," he said. "When I start forcing my shots and not getting my teammates involved, that's where I get in trouble a little bit."

Eddie Martin, Meeks's high school coach, said he had two high school all-Americans at Norcross — the current [Georgia Tech](#) forward Gani Lawal and Wake Forest's Al-Farouq Aminu. He said if Meeks had been a high school all-American, people would have been aware of his skills before this season.

"A lot of people just forgot about him last year when he was injured," Martin said. "And then people saw he wasn't a high school all-American and he didn't get that attention. You can see now what kind of player he is and what he can do with the ball. He was not a high school all-American, but he's going to be a college all-American and I think that will do just fine."

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