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## Making the case for Kentucky's Jodie Meeks as Player of the Year

### Story Highlights

Jodie Meeks is not only a lethal scorer, he's also remarkably efficient

His numbers resemble those of Duke's J.J. Redick during his Wooden Award year

Meeks is often overlooked because of Kentucky's struggles in a weak SEC

Here's a good bar bet for you. Find a watering hole in a good college hoops town and ask someone how many Wooden Award winners have come from the University of Kentucky.

The silence might be deafening, but not necessarily because Joe Hoops is stumped. It might be because the correct answer is zero.

Could that surprising fact change this season? It's not likely as the award continues its morph into the hardwood version of the Heisman Trophy, which annually is given to a highly-ranked team's quarterback who most fulfills preseason expectations. This season's Wooden designee appears to be Oklahoma forward **Blake Griffin**, he of the nasty windmill dunks, nastier 40-20 statlines, and soon-to-be-a-one-seed NCAA tournament status.

This is not to say that Griffin wouldn't be a deserving choice. He was expected to be great this season and he has been, averaging 22.8 points and 14.2 rebounds a game. His team was supposed to be very good, and the Sooners have surpassed that metric, sitting at 25-1 and looking set to take over the nation's No. 1 ranking on Monday. That combo provides a powerful path from preseason prognostication to postseason fait accompli.

It's possible, though, that he's the lesser choice, and the correct one should be **Jodie Meeks**.

"I've never been involved with a guy on our team ... where the guy has made so much difference for his team," said Kentucky coach **Billy Gillispie**, who noted that he didn't mean any disrespect to his former players, a group that notably includes standout guard **Acie Law** at Texas A&M. That's how important Meeks has been to the Wildcats.

Meeks' candidacy isn't solely about his third-in-the-nation scoring average of 25.8 points per game, or how he's trying to carry a pedestrian Kentucky team into the NCAA tournament. It's about more than his 54-point game at Tennessee (Division I's highest non-overtime scoring performance in 10 seasons), his two other 45-plus point games, or how he's more than tripling his career scoring average a season after only playing 11 games due to injury.

No, it's about how Meeks is having a truly great season the likes of which we often measure in eras, not years. One that he's simply not being given enough credit for. Maybe that's because Kentucky has lost some of its luster or because the SEC is down. Or maybe it's because the media often likes to see what they believe rather than vice versa. That's how a football team like Utah's can never make up for being unranked in the preseason, and how a star like Meeks can never overcome not being on the preseason all-SEC teams, let alone among the 20-odd guards on the preseason Wooden Award watch list.

The truth is that Griffin's having the best season by a Big 12 forward since ... last year, when **Michael Beasley** averaged 26 and 12 for Kansas State. Beasley, of course, had the best season for a Big 12 forward since ... the year before that, when **Kevin Durant** went for a nearly identical 26 and 11 at Texas.

Meanwhile, Meeks is having the best season for a major-conference guard since, well, it's unclear, but it's hard to come up with someone who's been better.

First, look at a comparison of the two:

(Offensive efficiency rank is among players who utilize at least 28 percent of a team's possessions while they are on the floor. True shooting percentage accounts for threes and free throws, too. Possessions used accounts for shots, turnovers and free throws. All data per kenpom.com through Tuesday's games.)

Basically, Meeks is forced to take a ton of shots for Kentucky, which lacks the secondary scoring options Griffin has at Oklahoma. While he scores more, he does so in more efficient fashion, while using up fewer possessions, in part due to Griffin's free throw struggles. Sure, you can't discount Griffin's dominant rebounding and inside presence, but you also can't ignore his superior surrounding cast or the fact that many of his hoops come from within a couple feet of the basket.

In an apples-to-apples guard comparison, Meeks stacks up favorably against recent history's gold standard: Duke's **J.J. Redick** during his Wooden Award season in 2005-06. Redick also carried the load for a team with only one teammate in double-figures (**Shelden Williams** at 18.8 points per game versus **Patrick Patterson's** 17.8).

Meeks also is shooting slightly better in every category (two-point range, three-point range and the free throw line) than Redick did that season.

Yes, both Redick's and Griffin's teams may have won more games than Kentucky has thus far, but it's not clear that either had a better individual year or meant more to his team's overall success.

Meeks currently is taking the highest percentage of his team's shots of any major-conference player in Division I, while maintaining the fifth-best true shooting percentage of any major-conference guard. That's an incredible combination that has led to Meeks owning the highest offensive efficiency rating of any high-usage major-conference player in Division I.

"He's had to carry an intense amount of our scoring load," Gillispie said. "Patrick [Patterson]'s been pretty good -- he's a very, very good player -- but Jodie has been phenomenal and is scoring against defenses designed to stop him."

Gillispie noted that Meeks goes as hard in practice as he does in games, and his scoring consistency lies in that sharp, relentless movement off the ball, and his impeccable technique once he gets his hands on it.

"He comes off screens so hard and so fast and with so much precision, there's not much fault in his footwork," said Appalachian State coach **Houston Fancher** after Meeks scored 46 points against his team earlier this season. "He's got great hands coming off screens and he gets his shot off at a jet-quick pace.

"If you're not there on the catch, then you're too late," Fancher added. "You should just go ahead and run the floor, because he's just going to stick [the jumper]."

Knocking down jumpers has been the rule, especially during Meeks' biggest scoring explosions. In his seven 30-plus point games this season, Meeks is shooting a searing 60.8 percent from the field and averaging 1.99 points per shot. In comparison, Durant had 11 30-plus games for Texas in 2006-07 during his Wooden season. He shot 51.8 percent from the field while averaging 1.53 points per shot during those games. Conclusion: Meeks has been lethal *and* lethally efficient. Not to mention humble.

"My main thing is that you don't have to take a lot of shots to score a lot of points," Meeks said. "I just try to take what the defense gives me, which is not always a whole lot."

It's enough for him to be having a season for the ages. Maybe it's time for more people to notice. And if they do, maybe the answer to that trivia question soon will be "one."

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