

# YAHOO! SPORTS

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## Duke a measuring stick for K-State



By Jason King, Yahoo! Sports Nov 23, 3:24 am EST

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Shortly after his team beat Marquette to advance to the championship game of the CBE Classic, Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski walked out of the Sprint Center on Monday knowing nothing about the following night's opponent.

"I haven't watched them," Krzyzewski said of the Kansas State Wildcats, and Blue Devils fans can only hope the Hall-of-Famer went back to his room at the Downtown Marriott and flipped on the TV.

Because as each minute passed in Kansas State's 81-64 victory over Gonzaga on Monday – as 3-pointer after 3-pointer swished through the net and as players dove for loose balls and scored easy points off turnovers – one thing became glaringly obvious to the 18,630 fans at the sold-out Sprint Center.

Kansas State can beat top-ranked Duke.

It could happen in March – and it could happen Tuesday night.

"If we're not at our best," Wildcats coach Frank Martin said, "we've got no chance."

That fourth-ranked Kansas State is even in this position is a credit to Martin, the former Wildcats' assistant who landed the job after Bob Huggins bolted for West Virginia after just one season.

Kansas State had gone 20 years without winning an NCAA tournament game before Martin's inaugural squad notched a victory in 2008. Less than three seasons later, the Wildcats' resume includes an Elite Eight appearance and a reputation as one of the toughest, grittiest teams in the country.

But they're not Duke. Not yet.

"They're the measuring stick," guard Jacob Pullen said.

It is mesmerizing, though, to think that Kansas State could catapult to the No. 1 spot in the Associated Press rankings with a victory over Duke. Fans in these parts are used to tradition-rich Kansas boasting that lofty status – but not Kansas State.

The sixth-ranked Jayhawks may still be the most popular team in the Sunflower State. But these days the Wildcats are creating just as much buzz. Martin and his players can only imagine how high the excitement level would rise if Kansas State were to defeat Duke.



"I'm not going to try to prepare them by saying, 'Hey, we're playing *Duke*,'" Martin said. "We play in the Big 12. We played Kansas (in 2008) when they were No. 2 in the country with seven pros on their team and beat them. We played Texas last year when they were ranked No. 1 and beat them.

"It's not like we're Mount St. Mary's. We've played these kinds of games before."

Perhaps, but it's been awhile since this group of Wildcats faced an opponent as good as the Blue Devils, who may be even better than they were last season.

Freshman Kyrie Irving is a future NBA lottery pick who is already being hailed as the school's top point guard since Jason Williams. Combo guard Nolan Smith and small forward Kyle Singler are senior All-American candidates who combined to average 35.1 points last season. And forward Mason Plumlee is one of the most skilled post players in the country.

Plumlee had 25 points and 12 rebounds in an 82-77 victory over Marquette.

"I don't know if you can pick your poison with them, because everyone is poisonous," Marquette coach Buzz Williams said.

Kansas State may not feature the same level of talent as Duke, as Pullen is the only player currently being mentioned in NBA draft circles. Still, the Wildcats take pride in creating havoc on the court with their defense.

Martin's squad jumped out to a big lead against Gonzaga by making nine of its first 11 3-point attempts. Then it held on in the second half by suffocating the Zags every time they touched the ball. Gonzaga shot just 23 percent from the field after intermission and only 33 percent for the game.

Pullen said K-State takes pride in scoring easy baskets created by its defense.

“We live in transition,” he said. “We don’t want to have to set up our offense if we don’t have to.”

That was certainly the case Monday, when No. 22 Gonzaga seemed overwhelmed.

“They’re a load to prepare for,” Zags coach Mark Few said. “They keep coming at you in droves. There’s no drop-off when they substitute. It’s a huge advantage for them – especially with as fast as they play.”

Pleased as they were with their performance, the Wildcats know it will take an even better effort to defeat Duke.

Instead of making bold predictions and coming across as over-confident, Kansas State’s players and coaches expressed respect for the Blue Devils during their postgame interviews and talked about the opportunity standing before them.

Martin, for instance, remembered a time in 1998 when he was an out-of-work high school basketball coach. He said he sent hundreds of letters to college programs across the country looking for a job.

Even though he didn’t have a position available, Krzyzewski took the time to respond.

“It was a hand-written note,” Martin said. “He was the only one I heard from. I’ll never forget that. It’s going to be a privilege to be able to tell my grandkids one day that I was fortunate to sit on the bench opposite Coach K.”

Martin paused.

“It’s hard to be good one year,” he said. “Duke has been good for 28 years. They’ve competed for national championships and conference championships for 28 years. That’s just ridiculous.”

Martin recalled sitting behind the West Virginia bench to support Huggins when he faced Duke in last year’s national semifinals. The Blue Devils beat the Mountaineers by 21 points, and Martin said he had never seen one of Huggins’ teams “dismantled” in that fashion.

If the Wildcats aren’t careful, the same thing could happen to them. Just like the rest of the fans who will pack the Sprint Center, Martin is ready to see how it all unfolds.



“It’s an unbelievable opportunity for K-State basketball,” Martin said. “Will we win? Will we lose? I don’t know. But we’re going to go out there and fight our tails off. That’s the challenge.

“When you don’t do that, you get embarrassed when you play Duke.”

A banner advertisement for Rivals.com. On the left, it says "Upgrade and score:" followed by a basketball icon. To the right, there are three bullet points: "• 100+ NCAA teams to choose from", "• Breaking news", and "• Expert analysis". Next to these is a yellow button that says "Try it Now". To the right of the button is the "rivals.com" logo with "from YAHOO! SPORTS" underneath. On the far right, there is a blue box that says "FREE 7-DAY TRIAL".

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