

The Very Best of Enemies

John Calipari comes to Kentucky with a huge contract, a banner recruiting class and a history with the state's other big ego, **Rick Pitino** | BY GRANT WAHL

In the spring of 1988, during his first season coaching the New York Knicks, Rick Pitino made an emergency trip to his alma mater, the University of Massachusetts. Pitino was on the search committee for a new UMass basketball coach, and he'd learned that athletic director Frank McInerney had soured at the last minute on the consensus choice—a 29-year-old Pittsburgh assistant named John Calipari—after hearing concerns about Calipari from a prominent coach. “Look, people have enemies in this game,” Pitino says he told the AD. “You can’t change your mind because one coach calls and says these things. That means he’s worried. If he’s worried about this guy, then that’s a good thing.”

Debate ensued. Finally, Pitino recalls, McInerney came around. “O.K., I’ll go with Calipari,” he said, “but we have one problem, Rick. I offered him a \$63,000 salary. We only have [\$58,000]. If you’ll write a check for \$5,000, we’ll stick with our original decision.”

“Fine, I’ll send it to you,” said Pitino.

“No,” said McInerney, whose department was strapped for cash. “I have to have it now.” These days Pitino can’t help but laugh as he tells the story. “The guy wouldn’t let me out of the meeting until I wrote the check!”

BLUE HEAVEN
After four seasons without even a Sweet 16 appearance, Kentucky fans—including 23,500 at the first practice—have hailed Calipari as a savior.



Funny how the world works. More than two decades later Calipari is the highest-paid coach in college basketball, freshly hired at Kentucky for eight years and \$31.65 million, and tasked with restoring its championship tradition. Along with a reputation that's equal parts outlier, outsider and outlaw, Calipari comes in with enormous expectations, a high-flying offense (the dribble-drive motion) and a powerhouse freshman class, led by point guard John Wall, the country's top recruit.

The response among Kentucky fans, whose team hasn't reached the NCAA tournament's second weekend since 2005, has been seismic. Wildcats backers filled nearly 500 tents camping out for as many as three days just to snag tickets for the first practice, which sold out 23,500-seat Rupp Arena. For the past seven months, in the wake of Billy Gillispie's two-year reign of error, Calipari has crisscrossed the commonwealth, spreading the message of change like a hybrid of Barack Obama and professor Harold Hill. All of which has been carefully monitored down the road in Louisville by Pitino, the coach who rescued Kentucky from the depths of probation in the 1990s, led the school to the 1996 national title and returned (to the everlasting consternation of Wildcats fans) to take over the archrival Cardinals in 2001.

When the Kentucky job came open last March, Pitino campaigned publicly for the candidacies of Oklahoma State's Travis Ford and Arkansas's John Pelphrey, two coaches who had played for Pitino in Lexington. But it was impossible to escape another conclusion, one that goes back to what Pitino said in that UMass conference room in 1988: If there was one coach in America who worried Pitino the most, it was John Calipari.

On June 2, the night before Calipari was to leave for a weeklong trip to China, a post on his Twitter page said that he planned to attend Mass the next day at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Usually Calipari goes to Mass early in the morning, but this time he arrived at noon. On his way out afterward, a man in a Kentucky shirt stopped him. "I just wanted to wish you well in China," he told the coach. Calipari was flabbergasted—and a little concerned. "How did he know I was coming at noon?" he asks. "He had to have waited there all morning,



REBUILDING BLOCK

The 6' 11" Cousins (15) originally committed to Memphis but followed Calipari to Lexington.

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That's when I had to remind everybody that I have a huge dog in our backyard."

Calipari is clearly enjoying his outsized popularity, signing thousands of copies of his new book, *Bounce Back*, all across Kentucky. But it doesn't take Alan Greenspan to know that Wildcats supporters give new meaning to the term irrational exuberance, with the impatience to match. Asked how long the Big Blue faithful will give him to win big, Calipari doesn't hesitate. "This year," he said during the first week of practice. "But it's a

new team, a new coaching staff, a new style. All of it's different."

Well, not all of it. When junior forward Patrick Patterson passed up the NBA draft and returned to Lexington, Calipari asked him why. Simple, Patterson replied. He had never played in the NCAA tournament; he was on track to graduate with a communications degree in three years; and he knew that at 6' 9" his NBA future depends on his ability to develop a floor game—the kind that's the hallmark of Calipari's dribble-drive motion attack. "He wants all his players to be able to handle the ball like a point guard," says Patterson. "I'm trying to adjust from posting up to facing up."

Yet even with Patterson, Kentucky was only an NIT team last season. If the Wildcats are going to make the Final Four, the onus will be on a potentially historic freshman class, which includes three likely first-year starters: DeMarcus Cousins, a mountainous 6' 11" forward from Mobile, who originally committed to play for Calipari at Memphis; Eric Bledsoe, a jet-propelled guard from Birmingham who may be Kentucky's best shooter; and the jewel of Calipari's Kids, Wall, a 6' 4" point guard from

Raleigh whose length, speed and vision combine to make him the projected top pick in the 2010 NBA draft.

Yet for all the excitement among Wildcats fans, there is only one game they really want to talk about. On Jan. 2 Kentucky will play Louisville at Rupp Arena. Or, as it's seen in the commonwealth, Calipari will meet Pitino. "I've been to 20 cities in the state of Kentucky," Calipari says. "I've been everywhere. And all I can tell you is: That is a big game. In Hazard I said to a crowd, 'If we lose to Louisville by 15 and still win the national title, will you be all right?' And there are people who said, 'No, it won't be all right!'"

Before Calipari accepted the Kentucky job last spring, he spoke over the phone with several former Wildcats coaches: Joe B. Hall, Eddie Sutton, Tubby Smith and—in a 10-minute call packed with meaning—Pitino. "I'm thinking about taking this job," Calipari told him. "What do you think?"

Pitino paused. He knew Calipari wasn't asking for his approval; knew, in fact, that Calipari was heading to Lexington no matter what he said. The two men are not close. The last time they had dinner together was a year and a half ago, at the LeBron James summer camp in Akron, and even that was a big-table affair. When Calipari and Pitino shared the stage at a charity fund-raiser in Louisville last month, witnesses described a palpable chill in the air. In Calipari's mind, though, the conversation with Pitino needed to happen. "To me it was Camelot," Pitino finally told him of his time in Lexington. "I coached there for eight years, and I never had a bad day on the job."

During Calipari's meteoric rise at UMass, as he validated Pitino's original endorsement, Calipari seldom missed a chance to thank him for the opportunity, while Pitino called the program's climb from irrelevance to a No. 1 ranking "the greatest building job in college basketball history." But the relationship grew icy over the years as they competed head-to-head, first in the college game (in which Kentucky beat UMass in the '96 national semifinals), then in the NBA (where Pitino's Celtics split six games against Calipari's Nets) and once again at the college level (where Pitino's Louisville and Calipari's Memphis

refusing to continue playing Memphis after Louisville joined the Big East.

These days Calipari is trying to play down any animosity. Yes, he avoided taking his assigned seat next to Pitino at June's NBA draft, but Calipari claims he needed to jump up to congratulate Tyreke Evans's family. ("I couldn't do that from where Rick was sitting," Calipari argues, and then adds, "I waved to him!") And yes, while hailing Kentucky's history of successful coaches at Big Blue Madness, Calipari cited Adolph Rupp, Hall and Smith but somehow neglected to mention Pitino. Calipari claims that was done to prevent a cascade of boos. "People want to act like we hate each other," Calipari says, "but I don't hate

Calipari brings a reputation that's equal parts outlier, outsider and outlaw.



met regularly in Conference USA before the Cardinals moved to the Big East in 2005).

They have faced each other 19 times—Pitino winning 11, Calipari eight—while producing the kind of dustups you might expect from two fiery coaches. In 2003 Pitino thought his rival was trying to influence referees through the media, and he ripped Calipari, saying, "When people start talking about the officials, you know they have some psychological problems." For his part Calipari called out Pitino for

him at all. I respect him as a coach, and I respect how hard his teams play."

Truth be told, the tension between the two may result from their similarities. Soon after they met, in 1977, at the Five-Star camp in Pittsburgh—Pitino was an assistant at Syracuse, Calipari a teenage camper—camp boss Howard Garfinkel started calling Calipari "the next Pitino." Calipari got the nickname Little Ricky at UMass, and the slick-haired, Armani-wrapped, Italian-American sideline stompers have since followed remarkably

parallel career arcs: runaway success in surprising places (Pitino at Providence, Calipari at UMass), humbling NBA failure (Pitino with the Celtics, Calipari with the Nets) and then triumphant college career revivals.

What's more, the reputations of both coaches took major hits during the summer. In August the married Pitino admitted that in 2003 he had engaged in consensual sex in a Louisville restaurant with a woman, Karen Sypher, who pleaded not guilty in May to felony charges of attempting to extort \$10 million from him. As for Calipari, he became the first coach in college history to preside over two vacated Final Four appearances when the NCAA wiped all of Memphis's wins in 2007–08 from the record books (and placed the school on three years' probation), a fate similar to UMass's after he left Amherst.

In his defense, Calipari notes that he wasn't singled out for wrongdoing in either case, that the Memphis ruling is under appeal and that he raised the graduation rates at both UMass and Memphis. But while he admits that his reputation has been tarnished, he won't promise that something similar won't happen at Kentucky. "I sit here and want to tell you that it won't," he says. "I would hope that we're recruiting the right

kind of kids and that we all do our jobs and there won't be any issues. We run a class program, we do things right, but there are times when things happen, not just in this program but in any program." Perhaps, but that isn't likely to quiet the schadenfreude crowd. Sample joke: What do you call the new reality show featuring the Kentucky coach and his main player rotation? *John and Vacate Plus Eight*.

Then again, those aren't Calipari's constituents. For all the comparisons to Pitino, Calipari has always been different in one enormous regard. He was an outsider, the coach who ran lower-tier outfits (UMass, the Nets, Memphis) while Pitino coached the blue bloods (the Knicks, Kentucky, the Celtics). Not anymore. For the first time Calipari has the institutional muscle of Kentucky basketball to match his talents as a recruiter and coach. Big Blue Nation is in his corner—for now, at least—and if Calipari wins big in Lexington, he'll do more than restore an iconic brand. He'll out-Pitino Rick Pitino. □

STRAINED RELATIONSHIP
Pitino (far left) helped launch Calipari's career but now has to battle him for state supremacy.

