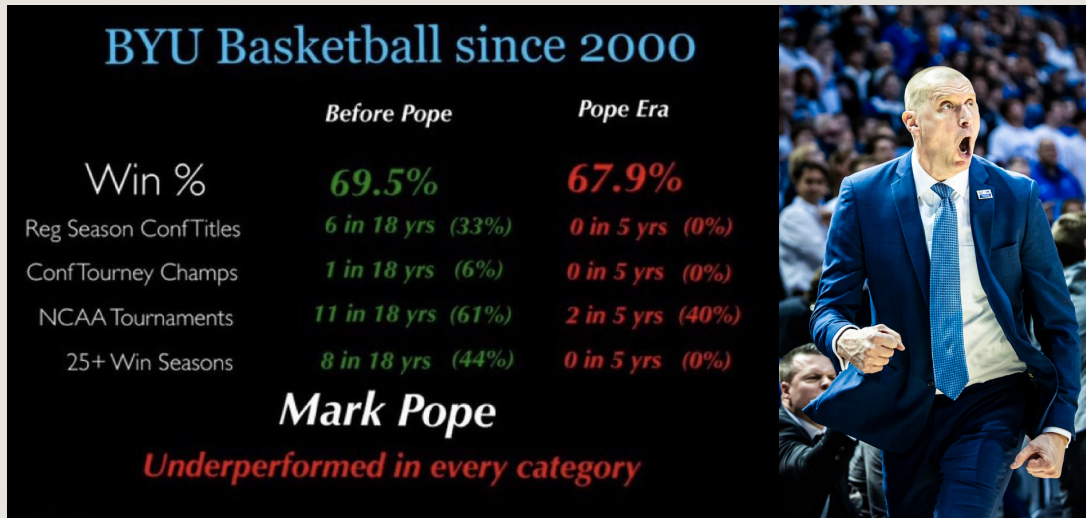


Did Mark Pope Underachieve at BYU?

Looking at the last 25 years of BYU basketball



If you have been on Twitter in the last month, especially in the replies of Kentucky/Arkansas related posts, you have likely seen the above graphic posted by a smug Arkansas fan. At first glance, it is a damning review of Pope's time in Provo. However, this graphic lacks key context surrounding BYU basketball and their journey in the last 25 seasons.

Math

Immediately, the creator of this graphic doesn't know how to count. There were 19 seasons of BYU basketball between the turn of the century and Mark Pope's tenure. So, let's update those percentages:

- Reg. Season Conf. Titles: 6 in 19 years (32%)
- Conf. Tourney Champs: 1 in 19 years (5%)
- NCAA Tournaments: 11 in 19 years (58%)
- 25+ Win Seasons: 8 (42%)

Okay, now that we have that out of the way, let's dig into these numbers and see where our lovely friends in Fayetteville went wrong.

Conference Titles

Mountain West Conference: 1999-2011

For 12 seasons, BYU was a member of the Mountain West Conference (MWC). In this time, they won 6 regular season titles (2001, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011) and 1 conference tournament title (2001). During this time, the MWC had some decent competition, namely Utah, San Diego State, and New Mexico, but only three teams during this time period earned at least a 3-seed in the NCAA Tournament (zero until 2010). What this means is that the MWC was relatively balanced, but lacked elite teams. The best team to come out of this conference during this 12 season stretch was the Kawhi Leonard San Diego State squad from 2010-11, a team that reached only the Sweet 16.

West Coast Conference: 2011-2023

In the summer of 2011, BYU made the transition to the West Coast Conference (WCC). There's this little tiny little Jesuit school in Washington called Gonzaga that ran this conference for decades. In BYU's 12 seasons in the WCC, Gonzaga won the WCC regular season title 11 times, finishing with either 1 or 0 conference losses 8 times. Gonzaga also earned at least a 3-seed in the NCAA Tournament 7 times during this stretch as well.

So, let's look at how many times BYU finished SECOND in the WCC before and after Mark Pope's tenure.

WCC 2ND PLACE BEFORE POPE	WCC 2ND PLACE WITH POPE
3 times in 8 years (38%)	2 times in 4 years (50%)

Would you look at that? An improvement!

Big 12: 2023-2024

This past season, BYU transitioned into the top ranked basketball conference in the country (per KenPom). The Big 12 is where respectable teams finish with sub-.500 conference records but still make the NCAA Tournament. In his first season, Mark Pope led the Cougars to a 10-8 record, including wins against 2-seed Iowa State, 3-seed Baylor, and 4-seed Kansas (in Phog Allen). I would say that the conference regular season and tournament title numbers do not paint the same picture once you look at the actual context.

NCAA Tournaments

This one is going to be easy. Technically speaking, the numbers are true that BYU made 11 tournaments in their 19 years before Pope (58% of the time) while Pope only participated in 2 tournaments in his 5 years (40%).

You know what you forgot to mention? COVID-19!!!!

During the 2019-20 season, Mark Pope had his Cougars absolutely ROLLING going into March. They had the #2 rated offense in the country (KenPom) and a 24-8 record with wins against Houston, Saint Mary's, and Gonzaga. Most NCAA Tournament projections had BYU as a 5-seed heading into March, which would have been BYU's best seed since 2011.

If we adjust the numbers to reflect that team as a tournament team, *which they were*, we see something interesting:

NCAA TOURNAMENTS BEFORE POPE	WITH POPE
11 times in 19 years (58%)	3 times in 5 years (60%)

Would you look at that? An improvement!



25+ Win Seasons

What a weird criteria to judge a coach. Twice Mark Pope finished with 24 win seasons, with one of those seasons cut short by COVID. But, if this is what we are going to do, let's dive into it.

Again, this is a pretty easy statistic to disprove. Let's look at the strength of schedule over at KenPom.

Average BYU SOS ranking/rating before Mark Pope	Average BYU SOS ranking/rating in their 8 25+ win seasons	Average BYU SOS ranking under Mark Pope
#91 (+3.80 rating)	#96 (+3.47 rating)	#75 (+7.46 rating)

As you can see, Mark Pope consistently played tougher schedules than the BYU teams before him, and he still got very close to the overall win-percentage of the 19 seasons before him.

You can choose to believe that Mark Pope played tougher schedules or not, but the numbers suggest that Pope would have won at a higher rate with the schedules played by BYU's previous teams.

Some Other Fun Facts

	Before Mark Pope (2000-2019)	With Mark Pope (2019-2024)
Finishing the season ranked in AP Poll	3 times in 19 years (16%)	2 times in 5 years (40%)
15.00+ SRS (Simple Rating System)	3 times in 19 years (16%)	3 times in 5 years (60%)
Top-25 Offense or Defense (KenPom)	7 times in 19 years (37%)	3 times in 5 years (60%)
65%+ season win percentage	15 times in 19 years (79%)	4 times in 5 years (80%)
6-seed or better in NCAA Tournament	1 time in 19 years (5%)	2 times in 5 years (40%)
Wins over top-30 KenPom Teams	18 in 19 years (0.9 per season)	12 in 5 years (2.4 per season)

In Conclusion

Is Mark Pope the next coming of John Wooden? Probably not.

Are there aspects of Pope's coaching resume that are questionable? Absolutely.

However, it is misleading to claim that Mark Pope's 5-season tenure at BYU resulted in underperformance. In fact, if we add in the context of conference realignment, a global pandemic, and scheduling patterns, we can see that Pope may have actually overperformed based on the previous 19 seasons of BYU Cougar basketball.

Now I will speak directly to the Arkansas fan whose reply this link was posted under who likely did not get this far in the article (reading is hard):

Right now, you feel like you're on cloud nine. I get it. John Calipari is a genuinely good coach with an amazing resume. If I was a fan of a mid-level SEC program, I would be stoked about hiring Calipari as well.

But, I do want to warn you, the past 5 years of Calipari basketball at Kentucky don't look anything like the last 5 years of Pope basketball at BYU. In the same way I just showed the Pope met or exceeded the expectations set by the previous 19 seasons, I can just as easily show you how Cal has **DRASTICALLY** underperformed at Kentucky during the same time period using the same comparative criteria.

I'm not trying to steal your joy – I do truly hope Cal is able to retire with some dignity. The man deserves it. But, I wouldn't go throwing stones when you now live inside the glass house that is Calipari University.

Go Cats! See you in Rupp.