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UK

FOR UK, SUCCESS IS AS SIMPLE AS ABC

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By **LARRY VAUGHT**
Sports Editor

They each have a different favorite route, but they have the same goal every time they catch a pass -- score a touchdown.

"I don't know if any of our defensive guys would agree with me because everybody likes to say that defense wins championships," said Kentucky junior receiver Derek Abney. "But if nobody scores, it's a tie. You've got to have somebody score to win. Scoring is what people come to see and cheer.

"There's nothing better than a touchdown catch. It's quick. The quarterback has the ball, throws it, the receiver has it and you have points. Everybody loves that."

Maybe not everyone, but Abney certainly has compatriots in receivers Aaron Boone, a senior, and Tommy Cook, a sophomore.

Together they combined for 104 catches for 1,307 yards and 15 touchdowns in 2001. Now the Wildcats are counting on A+B+C to equal even more touchdowns this season as they try to rebound from back-to-back two-win seasons.

"There's no doubt we need all three of those guys to have big seasons," said Kentucky coach Guy Morriss. "They all have special talents and if we can get the to them enough, they are going to get us some points."

No one had a better knack for doing that last year than Boone. He tied Abney for the team lead with six



touchdown catches. However, Abney had 66 catches, Boone only 18.

"I like to watch returns on special teams, but nothing beats a guy jumping over three defenders and coming down with the ball or fighting his way through a tackle after he's made a catch to score," Boone said. "It's more exciting than one guy just running 30 yards up the middle for a score. When the ball is in the air and you don't know who is coming down with it, that's exciting."

"A touchdown catch is the biggest play in football," Cook said. "There is such an adrenaline rush when you score a touchdown. There's not a better feeling in the world."

The three come from different backgrounds. Abney is from Wisconsin, a state not known for its football. Boone played high school football in Utah, signed with Snow Junior College, went on a 2-year mission trip and then played two years for Snow before signing with UK. Cook is from Texas and played in the state's large school division.

However, they do have two things in common -- all played quarterback at one time and all have speed.

"There is always going to be some pressure on a wide receiver because all eyes are on you when the ball is coming to you," Cook said. "There is not going to be anybody else but you to blame if you don't make the catch. The flip side is that when you catch the ball, all the glory comes to you."

Last year they all caught balls from Jared Lorenzen and Shane Boyd. That could have presented problems since Lorenzen is left-handed and Boyd right-handed. They throw with different velocity and rotations. They see different things on the field.

Yet the players say it makes no difference who is throwing the ball. If it is near them, they feel they should catch it.

"We have two great quarterbacks that can get you the

ball in any situation," Cook said. "As a receiver, you can't ask for more. We just have to do our job and catch the ball."

So the quarterback makes the receiver. Or does the receiver make the quarterback?

"I would probably always say the quarterback makes the receiver," Boone said. "The quarterback has to get you the ball. If you don't get the ball, a receiver can't do anything. Once you get the ball, you can make things happen and compliment the quarterback."

Abney has a slightly different view.

"You can't have one without the other," he said. "Jared is good at making us look good. The quarterback is a big part of it, but you can't have one without the other. If people are not catching the ball, the quarterback won't look good. If he's not throwing a good ball, you can't catch it."

All still remember their first scoring catch at Kentucky.

Cook's came late last year against Vanderbilt. He went on to score twice that game and once the next game against Tennessee.

"The first one was on a shallow route, which is about a 4- to 6-yard route," Cook said. "Jared threw a perfect ball. I caught it in stride and ran up the field for about 25 yards and scored. It was great."

Boone's first touchdown reception came at South Carolina.

"I don't even know if Shane meant to throw the ball to me or not," Boone said. "It was a looping pass over the middle. Nothing was going to stop me from getting in (the end zone). I wanted to score so bad.

"I remember taking off in the end zone and running a big circle and coming back and the linemen lifting me in the air. I was screaming. There were 84,000 fans there and Lou Holtz, a coach I had watched as a kid, was on the other sideline. I was living it up. Then I

looked at the scoreboard and it was 35-6. I said, 'Put me down. Put me down.' I'll never forget that."

Abney's first score came early in his redshirt freshman season against South Florida. Like Boone, he remembers being lifted in the air by a happy offensive lineman.

"I remember going crazy after the catch," Abney said. "Your first touchdown, especially at home, is just amazing. I don't remember specific catches or stats, but I remember that one."

They each like to score in different ways. Cook prefers a post route that lets him "lay out" for the ball and make spectacular catches. Abney likes a shorter route, one where he can make the catch and then use his elusiveness to break a big play. Boone's choice is a fade route, where he can go one-on-one and try to out jump a defender for the ball.

"When you can make that touchdown catch, it hurts the defense and makes everyone on your team enthusiastic," Cook said. "You are catching it for 10 other players and those offensive linemen really like it."

They all know they cannot score every time they make a catch. But that doesn't stop them from trying.

"It's first and foremost in your mind every time you catch the ball," Cook said. "If you run a good route, you should have a chance to score. Every route we run is designed to score."

"I want to get at least one touchdown every game," Abney said. "Two would be even better, but one is great production."

Boone has had a knack for making the most of his catches as shown by his team-best touchdown per catches ratio last season.

"Every time you make a catch, you should be looking to score," Boone said. "That's all I ever think about. I'm not looking at defenders. I'm looking at the goal

line and thinking touchdown."

That's partly why the three like being on the field as much as possible.

Cook said if UK runs 85 offensive plays, he could play 65 -- or more if needed.

"As a competitor, you want to be in the game all the time," Cook said. "There comes a time when you have to take a break. When it comes to crunch time, if coaches and teammates are depending on you, then you need to be able to play. If that happens, I'll be in there. Anybody would."

Yet Boone says players have to be realistic and understand when fatigue can keep them from being effective.

"You may not want to admit it because you are always thinking about making a big play, but there are times you are better off coming out and having a player with fresh legs in the game," Boone said. "The best rotation is the one that brings in the players that run that particular play the best. Everyone has a specialty, but when you are tired, even that can change and you have to recognize that so you don't hurt the team."

Abney says receivers coach Harold Jackson encourages him to play as much as he can and that Jackson, a former All-Pro receiver, doesn't like to take his top players any more than necessary.

"He leaves it to us to know when we are effective and when we are tired," Abney said. "He leaves a lot of it to us to know what we can and can't do."

What the trio hopes to do this season is score and score often. Doesn't matter if passes are coming from Lorenzen, the No. 1 quarterback going into the season, or Boyd.

"I think we'll be able to score a lot of points," Cook said. "By the end of last year we were pretty much doing that unless we stopped ourselves. But this year I think we're going to score a lot more right from the start."