

## UK's Boone is still on a mission

By Michael Smith

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The Courier-Journal

LEXINGTON, Ky. -- Aaron Boone sat in the homes of drug dealers, addicts and wealthy businessmen and heard their life stories.

He watched adobe homes wash down the street after a vicious storm, then helped rebuild them. He rode buses on narrow dirt roads around sharp mountain corners. He took the back seat; sheep rode in the front.

He clung to his pillow while gangs fought just outside his window.

And after all that on his Mormon mission to Peru, he couldn't wait to return.

If life is measured by experiences, Boone is ahead of the game. The University of Kentucky's talented wide receiver has packed a lifetime of living into his 24 years. And he says he's just getting started.

"There's so much more to life than material things," Boone said. "Maybe I feel that way because I came from humble beginnings. Sure, I want to be successful, but there are so many more things I want to do. I want to see places. You know, I don't have any money, but I have experiences."

UK fans are just learning about the senior on the football field. After transferring from a Utah junior college, he started making an impact toward the end of last season.

At 6 feet 3 he provides a big target, and his leaping ability produces highlight-reel catches. His emergence has continued this season, including his heroic seven-catch, 102-yard game at Arkansas last week.

"I feel guilty whenever I don't throw him the ball," quarterback Jared Lorenzen said.

Those who have known him since high school in Utah call Boone, the sixth of 10 kids, a natural leader. He was the starting quarterback for Millard High's state championship team, picked for the job because of his personality more than his skills.

### Next for U of K

Who: Georgia  
When: 3:30 p.m. EDT tomorrow

Where: Commonwealth Stadium  
TV: CBS-32



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Senior wide receiver Aaron Boone, left, cutting up with his UK teammates after practice yesterday, has seen a lot of the world in his 24 years. "There's so much more to life than material things," he said.

PHOTO BY STEWART BOWMAN, THE C-J

Boone was a defensive end as a junior at Millard in his hometown of Fillmore, but when Frank Bramhall took over as coach, he moved him to quarterback.

"He was always very charismatic," Bramhall said, "and we needed a leader at quarterback. The guy who had started the year before was coming back, but I decided to go with Aaron. It was the best thing I ever did."

With his lucky ring tied to his shoelaces, Boone ran Millard's option offense to perfection. But there was more. In the state semifinals, Millard trailed 8-6 and faced fourth-and-long deep in the opponent's territory. The only problem was that Millard didn't have a place-kicker. So Bramhall called on Boone to try a 34-yard field goal.

"Everybody looked at me like, 'No, no,' but Aaron said, 'I'll hit it,' " Bramhall recalled. "And he did. He knocked it right down the middle. Then he made the game-saving interception."

It wasn't easy moving from a large high school in Provo, Utah, to tiny Millard, especially after his parents divorced when he was 15, but Boone adjusted. As a 5-6, 119-pound freshman, he played junior-varsity football. As a sophomore, he helped the baseball team win the state title.

Boone was just as much of a leader off the field. He was elected student body president as a senior with the slogan, "Shake your Boonie." He distributed hundreds of tie-dyed headbands and acted out one of the school's most memorable campaign skits as an evangelical minister with the solution to all of the students' problems.

"It was a real hit, and from that moment on he was the winner," said LaRee Stephenson, one of Boone's teachers at Millard. "The students loved him. He won the election in an overwhelming manner."

Boone wanted to play college football like his father, who walked on at Brigham Young. But much of the recruiting attention from the smaller schools that had been interested cooled when coaches found out he wanted to take two years to go on a Mormon mission.

"Most of them weren't willing to hold a scholarship open for me for two years," Boone said.

He went to Snow College, a two-year school that was close to Fillmore. He spent his first year watching from the sideline as the fifth-string quarterback, an early indication that his football future might lie elsewhere.

"I thought I was the bomb, but I got put in my place pretty quick," he said.

Boone began saving money for the mission trip by working at a convenience store from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. three nights a week and cleaning horse stalls on Saturday mornings.

His jobs and the generosity of creditors enabled him to make the trip. He teamed with other missionaries, mostly from South America, and his Spanish rapidly improved.

Boone describes his two years in Peru as life-changing. He lost 30 pounds and at times feared for his life, but he learned a lot as well.

He saw families whose outlook was not dependent on their wealth. He saw children, happy as can be, playing in the dirt streets with a worn-out ball.

He talked about Christ with everyone from street thugs to millionaires.

"The mission opened my eyes," he said. "Where else in life can you go into the homes of complete strangers and talk about your lives and talk about God? I was 19, I was a kid, but in two years I grew up so much."

Inspired by his trip to Peru, Boone found other opportunities to study abroad. He spent six weeks in China, returned to Peru and went to Mexico, Puerto Rico and Japan.

"I maxed out the credit cards," he said.

He paid for it by creating his own little import business, buying goods such as jewelry and bringing them home for sale. He also picked tomatoes and sold them at the farmers' market, anything to generate income for his trips.

In some ways his mission never really ended. He gladly tells inquisitors about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and attempts to correct many of the misconceptions.

Good grief, if he had a nickel for every time he's been asked about polygamy.

"That hasn't been practiced in our church in more than 110 years," he said.

Boone leaned on his faith to guide him through his parents' divorce and the death of a brother, just as it guides him on daily decisions. He doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke and he doesn't use drugs.

"Never have," he said. "My joke about that is, 'Look at me. I'm a white wide receiver playing in the best football conference in the country. I need all the help I can get.' It's the truth. I'm not the most talented person, but living a healthy lifestyle will benefit me."

And he has decided to save sex for marriage.

"That's another Christian belief that you wait until you're married," he said. "That's what I've chosen to do. But I'm getting up there in age. I've got to find a wife here pretty soon."

The biggest upset of all might be that Boone landed in Kentucky. He moved from quarterback to wide receiver at Snow, where he evolved into one of the top junior-college receivers in the nation.

BYU and Utah offered him scholarships, along with almost every school on the West Coast. But UK's passing offense under former coach Hal Mumme intrigued him, as did the Southeastern Conference.

"My dad wanted me to go to BYU, but coach Mumme assured me everything was going to be OK here," Boone said.

If anything, he has learned to adapt. Two weeks after his arrival, Mumme resigned under pressure, and Boone had to adapt again.

Through all of his experiences, he has learned that things tend to work out, mostly for the better. He's now one of the best receivers on a resurgent team that has a chance to catch the country's attention tomorrow against No. 5 Georgia.

When he's done at UK, Boone could have more football in his future. His size, hands and leaping ability make him a prospect for the National Football League.

If that works out, he'll use it as a means of securing his financial future, but he isn't banking on it. As he learned on his mission, there are too many other things to do.

"The mission was a chance to give back. I wanted to give back for all the things I've been blessed with," Boone said. "But once you get out there, you find out you're not giving back, you're actually getting more. I learned so much more than I taught anybody."

He's still learning, still giving. Mostly, though, he's still living.

And he can't wait to see what's next.

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