

IDEA GUIDE



VISITLEX

Lexington Visitors Center  
215 West Main Street  
Lexington, KY 40507  
(859) 233-7299 or (800) 845-3959  
www.visitlex.com

# FROM HOOPS TO HORSE RACING

*Sports Enthusiasts Will Find Plenty to Cheer About in Lexington*

From the race track to the basketball court and the gridiron to the golf course, competition is king in Lexington. From decades-old traditions like University of Kentucky college basketball and horse racing, to recent additions such as professional baseball, the Lexington sports scene is full of thrilling spectator events.

Here's how to get in on the action:

## Join the Wildcat Hoopla

Lexington is home to one of the most venerable college basketball traditions in the nation—the University of Kentucky Wildcats.

“Big Blue” can boast:

- eight NCAA championships (1948, 1949, 1951, 1958, 1978, 1996, 1998 and 2012);

- the legacy of coaches such as Adolph Rupp, one of college basketball's all-time winningest coaches, and the flamboyant Rick Pitino, who left after the 1996/97 season to coach the Boston Celtics; and

- legions of passionate fans, for whom basketball is a way of life.

Current Head Coach John Calipari has been to four Final Fours with Kentucky (2011, 2012, 2014 and 2015), adding the eighth NCAA championship in 2012.

UK home basketball games have been sold out since the 1930s, so even with 23,000 seats in Rupp

Arena, getting tickets isn't easy. Most of the seats are filled with season ticket holders. Any tickets from the student allotment that go unsold (it happens with a few tickets in about half of the 15 or so home games, according to UK) are made available to the public through the **UK Ticket Office**, usually about two weeks before game day. Call the Ticket Office at (859) 257-1818 to check ticket availability.

Keep in mind that scalping is illegal in Kentucky, so proceed with caution when dealing with folks offering tickets for sale outside the arena on game days.

Die-hard fans from around the country like to take a peek in to the revered **Rupp Arena**. There's

a viewing window near the Lexington Center Offices. Call ahead: (859) 233-4567.

One UK basketball event the public has a good shot at attending is the team's first practice in mid-October. “**Big Blue Madness**” is held at Rupp Arena, usually the first Friday the NCAA allows practice. The practice is accompanied by a variety of entertainment

and festivities. Admission is free, but you do need a ticket—available at the box office at Memorial Coliseum and through TicketMaster (service charge applies). They do sell out. Some fans camp out in front of Memorial Coliseum days in advance to make sure they get one of the 23,000 seats.

**Bluegrass Note:** Basketball began at UK (then known as Kentucky State College) with a women's team in 1902. A year later the first men's team was organized. The first recorded men's game took place on February 6, 1903, against nearby Georgetown College. Georgetown won, 15-6.

Any time of year, you can visit **Memorial Coliseum**. Located on Euclid and Limestone on the UK campus, this was home court for the Wildcats from 1950 until Rupp Arena opened in 1976. The halls and upstairs office areas include a variety of trophies and other memorabilia.

Don't forget that UK's isn't the only basketball tradition in the Bluegrass. **Transylvania University** in Lexington and nearby **Georgetown College** are often strong contenders in their divisions. And many Kentuckians would argue that the high school game in Kentucky is almost as sweet as college ball. Lexington hosts the "**Sweet 16**" **Boys State Tournament** in March.

## Horse Racing — Of Course!

Horse racing has been an important part of Lexington since the city's earliest days, when Main Street itself served as the track. Now safely confined to Keeneland Race Course for Thoroughbred racing, and Red Mile Harness Track for trotting and pacing, horse racing remains one of Lexington's most beloved and thrilling traditions.

Lexington is the center of the Thoroughbred breeding industry, and its Thoroughbred track, **Keeneland Race Course**, 4201 Versailles Road, is arguably the most picturesque and tradition-laden track in the United States. With its lovely stone buildings, beautifully landscaped grounds and refined atmosphere, Keeneland strives to live up to

**Bluegrass Note:** Keeneland, organized by over 200 Bluegrass horse breeders and turf enthusiasts, held its first race in October 1936. Actually, construction of the track had begun several years earlier on private property by John Oliver "Jack" Keene, who intended it as a private track but ran out of money. The track is located on land granted to the Keene family by Patrick Henry.

its slogan of "racing as it was meant to be."

Race meets are brief— three weeks in April and three weeks in October — but attract the cream of the Thoroughbred world. The top horses, trainers and riders come to Keeneland, and in its stands you'll often find celebrities and royalty. Prior to 2007, Keeneland was the only U.S. track ever visited by Queen Elizabeth II of England. Her Majesty attended the 133rd Kentucky Derby in Louisville with her

husband Prince Philip, but they stayed in the Bluegrass!

Regular folks are just as welcome, however. Keeneland is one of few tracks where you can visit

**Bluegrass Note:** Lexington's first racetrack, the Kentucky Association track, opened in the 1830's near what is now 5th and Race Streets in downtown. Known as Chittlin' Switch, the track operated for over a century. Tradition holds that at the track a woman hung her silk purse at the finish line to be collected by the winner, thus giving rise to the term "purse" for racing rewards.

the barn areas and have a good view of the horses being saddled in the paddock area. The track is home to a number of major stakes races, including the spring Blue Grass Stakes, a major prep race for the Kentucky Derby. Visitors are welcome to watch morning workouts and dine at the Track Kitchen, not just during race meets, but year-round. For racing dates and more information, call (859) 254-3412 or (800) 456-3412.

There has been harness racing at **The Red Mile Harness Track** since 1875, making it Lexington's oldest existing track and one of the oldest in the United States. The track is located at 1200 Red Mile Road (off South Broadway, just blocks from downtown). Named for the clay soil of its track, The Red Mile is home to Standardbred racing, in

which horses race in distinct gaits, pulling two-wheeled sulkies from which riders direct the action.

Live racing in the fall runs from late summer through early October. The fall Grand Circuit Meet includes the Kentucky Futurity, the third jewel in harness racing's Triple Crown. Call ahead for the current racing schedule. (859) 255-0752. The track is open to visitors year-round, and there is a wagering floor in the entertainment complex that offers 900 casino-style "instant racing machines".

There's often televised racing from other tracks at Keeneland and Red Mile, with intertrack wagering. Call to see what's scheduled.

## Gridiron Cats

UK's sports teams were originally known as the Cadets, reflecting the school's strong ROTC program. Commenting on a

6-2 football victory over the University of Illinois on October 3, 1909, First Lieutenant Philip Corbusier, commandant and professor of Military Science and Tactics at UK, told an audience of students that the team had "fought like wildcats." The press picked up on the term, and the team nickname was born.

Although **football** may sometimes play second fiddle to basketball at the University of Kentucky, the football Wildcats manage to attract quite a crowd to the 61,000-seat Kroger Field in the fall. Hal Mumme, who made his debut in the fall of 1997, took the Cats to the 1999 Outback Bowl, with the help of quarterback Tim Couch, the number one NFL draft pick in 1999.

Exciting new features were recently added to Kroger Field (formerly known as Commonwealth Stadium) during a renovation project, including a stunning exterior "facelift." Players, coaches, students and fans are all reaping the benefits of this \$120-million reinvention.

As with basketball, many seats go to season ticket-holders. You can find out about remaining tick-

ets for the six or so home games by calling the UK Athletic Ticket Office at (859) 257-1818. If you do come, take advantage of Touchdown Downtown. Park downtown and take the shuttle to the stadium. It's only five dollars round trip.

## Lexington Legends

Lexington has always been home to horse racing legends; now the area is home to a professional baseball club. The Lexington Legends, a Proud

Single A Affiliate of the Kansas City Royals, play at beautiful Whitaker Bank Ball Park, a \$13.5 million stadium that puts fans closer to the action than any other ballpark in the Minor Leagues. Besides great baseball, there always seems to be a special promotion to entice fans ranging from a 25 cent hotdog night to dollar beer nights for adults. There is even a special night when you are encouraged to bring your favorite canine friend! Expect a fireworks show on the weekends. There's a kids' play area, complete with a playground and inflatables. In addition to games April through September, the ballpark hosts a variety of concerts and special events throughout the year. For information call (859) 252-4487. Check the schedule at [www.lexingtonlegends.com](http://www.lexingtonlegends.com).

## Golf

Golf enthusiasts can test their skills on some championship-caliber courses in the Bluegrass.

Previously a stop on the PGA Senior Tour, **Kearney Hill Links** (3403 Kearney Road; 859-253-1981) is a challenging course with plenty of water and bunkers. This British-style course was designed by noted course architects Pete and P.B. Dye. It has been named the top public course in Kentucky and one of the top 100 in the nation.

**Griffin Gate Marriott Resort & Spa** (1720 Newtown Pike; 859-288-6193), a semi-private course, has also hosted professional competition. At

**Bluegrass Note:** The **Lexington Polo Club** plays its matches at the Kentucky Horse Park on Sunday afternoons — a great excuse to take a picnic or to tailgate. In the winter, matches are played at the indoor arena, making Lexington one of the few places in the United States where you can watch indoor polo.

**Bluegrass Note:** UK was a national force in college football during the tenure of Paul William "Bear" Bryant, coach from 1946 to 1954. He led the football Wildcats to four bowl games, but resigned from UK because of conflicts with basketball coach Adolph Rupp.

these and other Lexington area courses you'll enjoy exciting play in a scenic setting.

These are just two of the area's 20 or so courses. Weather permitting, it is possible to hit the links year-round. Conveniently located at the crossroads of Interstate 64 and 75, many avid golfers head to Lexington for winter golf, attracted both by the great courses and reduced winter rates.

As PGA veteran Gary Player put it after winning the 1993 PGA Senior Classic in Lexington, "I've traveled more than any athlete that's ever lived, and I've never seen a more beautiful part of the world than here in Lexington."

## Kentucky Bank Tennis Championships

If you follow tennis, you may already know that many of today's tennis stars first drew notice at this annual July event. Katarina Srebotnik, John Isner, James Blake, Tommy Haas, Lleyton Hewitt, Justin Gimelstob and many others have played in this tournament held at the Hilary J. Boone Tennis Complex on the University of Kentucky campus.

This Kentucky event is a \$100,000 professional USTA tennis tournament with equal prize money for both men and women participants: one of only three tournaments in the world that holds this distinction.

**Bluegrass Note:** Baseball in Lexington has a proud history. The Lexington Hustlers, a Negro Baseball League team, started playing in 1947. Coach John Will "Scoop" Brown accepted a young white man who had been rejected by the all-white teams for being too small. By 1949, seven of the nineteen team members were white, creating the first integrated baseball team in the South.

## Bluegrass State Games


Sports is integral to community life in the Bluegrass Region. Central Kentucky's facilities, accessibility, mild climate, professional sports clubs, and athletes put the Region on par with any major destination in the country.

Amateur sports are highlighted during the popular Bluegrass State Games. Held each winter and summer, over 13,000 athletes of all ages compete in more than 30 sports. The diversity of competition is astounding: from hardcourt bike polo to table tennis and volleyball to corn hole.

## High Impact

Attended a roller derby bout lately? Yes, Lexington has a women's flat track roller derby league: the Roller Girls of Central Kentucky, aka "ROCK." The 25 member league was founded in 2007. Home games, which often sell out, are held at Heritage Hall at Lexington's convention center, off Main Street.

Headquartered at the Lexington Ice Center is the Lexington Amateur Ice Hockey Association. There are two leagues. They play year-round. The schedule can be found at [www.laiha.com](http://www.laiha.com). Take note: they offer pickup games, in case you remember to pack your ice hockey gear!

(859) 269-5686. 

For more information  
contact VisitLEX, the Lexington Convention  
and Visitors Bureau, at 800-845-3959.

*By Teresa Day, a freelance travel writer based in Lexington, KY  
Updated February 2018  
Copyright: Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau*

