

Home / Sports / WKU Sports

[http://www.bgdailynews.com/sports/wku/hilltopper-o-line-aims-for-improvement-in-under-woods/article\\_9163a943-ef8e-55c2-a4d4-282a90f88cd1.html](http://www.bgdailynews.com/sports/wku/hilltopper-o-line-aims-for-improvement-in-under-woods/article_9163a943-ef8e-55c2-a4d4-282a90f88cd1.html)

TOP STORY

WKU FOOTBALL

## Hilltopper O-line aims for improvement in 2018 under Woods

Edwards, Witt among those back from unit that struggled in 2017

BRAD STEPHENS [bstephens@bgdailynews.com](mailto:bstephens@bgdailynews.com) 1 hr ago



Western Kentucky offensive linemen Preston Mixon (left) and Seth Joest participate in a blocking drill during practice Saturday at Houchens-Smith Stadium.

Western Kentucky's offensive line has plenty to prove in 2018.

The position group took a dramatic step back last season after being a strength of the Hilltopper program in recent years. WKU ranked No. 127 of 130 FBS teams in pass protection (3.69 sacks per game) and was the only team in the nation that failed to produce a single 20-yard rushing play.

"I mean, obviously we weren't where we wanted to be last season and I think everyone took it to heart a little bit," guard Tyler Witt said Friday after the team's fifth spring practice. "Obviously, it's been driving us to get better and work harder, work harder than we did before and try new things. I think it's going to pay off in the end."

The Toppers' offensive line was a cornerstone for teams that won Conference USA championships in 2015 and '16.

Max Halpin, Darrell Williams Jr. and Forrest Lamp – who became the first second-round NFL Draft pick in WKU history last April – anchored a group that paved the way for record-setting offenses.

Those three graduated after the 2016 season, and the Hilltoppers struggled to fill those voids last year. WKU finished No. 96 nationally in yards per play (5.32) one season after leading the nation in that category (7.65).

The Tops' O-line also dealt with a fluid coaching situation. New position coach Geoff Dartt was diagnosed in October with brain tumors, so tight ends coach Ryan Mahaffey and a graduate assistant had to handle day-to-day coaching duties over the last half of the season.

Coach Mike Sanford brought in veteran offensive line coach TJ Woods this offseason to lead the offensive line. He's coached O-linemen at four FBS schools since 2007, most recently at Oregon State from 2015-17.

Sean Harlow and Isaac Seumalo became NFL Draft picks during Woods' time with the Beavers. Rob Havenstein, who Woods coached at Wisconsin, was a second-round pick in 2015.

"There's just a different energy when he's in the room," Witt said of Woods. "... When he gets on the field he's going to get on you and he's going to make sure you know what you're doing wrong.

"Then it's right back in the film room. 'OK, here's what you need to do.' "

Woods said that his players' desire to improve upon their performances from 2017 is palpable.

"I don't think anybody in that room is proud of the way they played both individually and as a group," Woods said. "That's good, you know. To me, that's what you want. I think they're motivated to come out and get better."

Dennis Edwards is WKU's most experienced offensive lineman. The redshirt senior has started since the 2015 season and moved from right guard to center for the 2017 campaign.





Edwards sees the Hilltoppers' 15 spring practices as valuable time for the O-linemen to get used to playing with one another.

“Obviously, there are new pieces being put in, so we’ve got to learn to work together,” Edwards said. “That’s in any O-line, though. That’s the biggest thing in O-line play in spring, just learning to work with each other and work as a unit.”

WKU must replace left guard Brandon Ray, a first team All-C-USA selection in 2017. Tackles Jimmie Sims and Matt Nord also graduated.

Witt took over at right guard for Miles Pate midway through the 2017 season as a redshirt freshman. Cole Spencer, now a sophomore, played much of the way at right tackle for the final half of last season as a true freshman.

Pate is back as a redshirt junior, as is tackle Parker Howell, who played in all 13 games last season for WKU.

Woods identified R.J. Scaife and Seth Joest as other O-linemen who’ve performed well this spring. Bowling Green native Jordan Meredith returned from injury last week, with Woods saying his presence gives the Hilltoppers better depth up front.

“I think they’ve got the right attitude,” Woods said. “They’re working hard. They’ve got a lot to learn – obviously different techniques and same schemes, which I think helps them a little bit. There are some nuances to the offense this year that we’re trying to implement.



“They’ve got a little bit of paralysis by analysis, but I think every practice they’ve come out here and gotten a little better at that. That’s progress.”

---

**Ad** 

– Follow Daily News sports reporter Brad Stephens on Twitter @BradBGDN or visit bgdailynews.com.

---

## Brad Stephens

Bowling Green Daily News sports reporter primarily covering Western Kentucky football and men's basketball.