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TOP STORY

WKU men's basketball

'Sky's the limit' for Hollingsworth after remarkable freshman year

Guard broke Hilltoppers' freshman scoring record in 2017-18

By BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Mar 31, 2018



Western Kentucky freshman guard Taveion Hollingsworth walks onto the court March 8 before WKU's 98-70 win over UAB in the Conference USA Tournament quarterfinals at The Star in Frisco, Texas.

A floppy-haired freshman has given Western Kentucky fans reason to be excited about the future of the Hilltoppers' program.

Taveion Hollingsworth accomplished more in his debut season than any other WKU freshman ever has. He set school records for points scored (506) and minutes played (1,312) by a varsity freshman, all while becoming the Toppers' top perimeter defender.

"The other day I was joking with him," forward Dwight Coleby told the Daily News on Monday in New York. "I was like, 'I'm standing in front of a legend right now.'"

Hollingsworth's first season at WKU ended Tuesday with a 69-64 loss to Utah in the National Invitation Tournament semifinals. The Hilltoppers raced out to an 18-5 lead late in the first quarter but endured a season-worst 34.8-percent mark from the floor and fell to the Utes by five.

Hollingsworth wasn't immune to WKU's cold shooting night. He finished 3-of-10 from the floor and 2-of-7 from the 3-point line. His eight points were a drop from his season average of 13.3 points per game.

Hollingsworth acknowledged the end-of-season emotions in the immediate aftermath of Tuesday's loss.

The Lexington native also took time to appreciate the Tops' success in 2017-18.

WKU won 27 games, filled E.A. Diddle Arena past its listed capacity three times, went 5-3 against teams from the nation's top seven conferences and infused excitement back into the program.

"Hopefully teams start to respect us," Hollingsworth said. "Next year, losing in the (Conference USA) championship and then losing in the (NIT) semifinals, that should motivate some of us.

"We're definitely back. This season kicked it off."

Hollingsworth had a stellar prep career at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Lexington. The 6-foot-2 guard led the Bulldogs to a 2016 boys' state title, then was named Kentucky Mr. Basketball a year later after averaging 28.3 ppg as a senior.

WKU coach Rick Stansbury recruited the in-state star relentlessly, selling him on the chance to help revive the Hilltoppers' proud program. He bought into that vision and signed with WKU in November 2016, choosing the Toppers over Alabama-Birmingham.

Hollingsworth, a three-star signee, was the third-most highly touted of Stansbury's fall 2016 signees. Center Mitchell Robinson was a five-star McDonald's All-American. Guard Josh Anderson was a four-star prospect ranked in the top 60 of his class by the major recruiting services.

Robinson left WKU for good in September before ever playing a game. Anderson was held out of competition until January while the NCAA reviewed his high school academics.

Hollingsworth filled that void starting as soon as he arrived on campus. Stansbury consistently said the freshman was the Toppers' top performer during offseason conditioning drills.

"I've never had a freshman lead a team in conditioning," Stansbury said. "... Immediately, he got the respect of that team."

That respect led to Hollingsworth being named the first freshman captain ever in WKU basketball history.

Hollingsworth carried over his offseason work into productivity once the season began.

He scored a key 15 points Nov. 23 in the Hilltoppers' biggest win of the nonconference schedule: a 77-73 upset of then-No. 18 Purdue at the Battle 4 Atlantis.

Hollingsworth made a career high five 3-pointers Feb. 1 in a 72-60 win at Texas El-Paso. He went for 20 points Feb. 8 in a victory over Florida Atlantic, one game after breaking his nose.

Hollingsworth scored 30 points – the most by a WKU freshman since 1955 – Feb. 15 in a 102-94 overtime win at North Texas. He then matched that 30-point effort March 21 in the NIT quarterfinals, dominating Oklahoma State in front of a rowdy crowd at Gallagher-Iba Arena.

“He’s just a competitor,” said Hollingsworth’s fellow freshman guard and roommate, Jake Ohmer. “He’s going to go out and score. That’s just how he plays. I mean everybody who watches him knows he’s going to score.”

Hollingsworth showed off his offensive skills throughout the season. His 48 percent mark from the floor reflected his mid-range shooting abilities and toughness to finish at the rim. He also hit 37.8 percent of his 3-point attempts, second for WKU behind only Justin Johnson (41.6 percent).

Hollingsworth’s offensive versatility was a key factor in the Toppers scoring 2,979 points – the second most in program history for a single season.

“When I see him turning down shots, I get on him like, ‘Why are you not shooting that?’ ” Coleby said. “I know you’re a good shooter. I watch you every day. Play your game.”

Hollingsworth’s crowning achievement for the 2017-18 season was passing school legend Courtney Lee atop the school’s freshman scoring list.

Lee, now an NBA veteran, scored 461 points as a freshman in 2004-05, surpassing a previous record set in 1954-55 by Ralph Crosthwaite (437). Derrick Gordon (412 points in 2011-12) was the only other Hilltopper freshman to reach 400 points in a season before Hollingsworth came along.

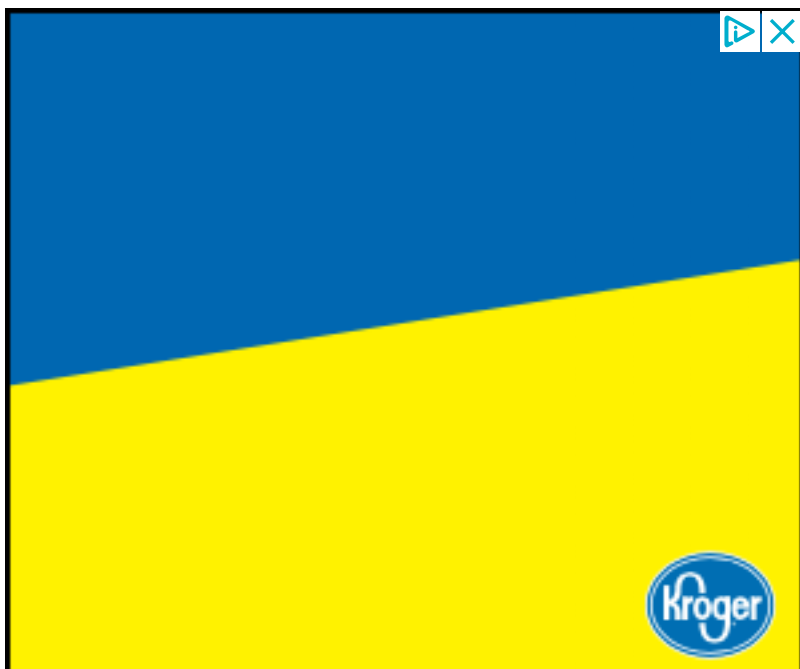
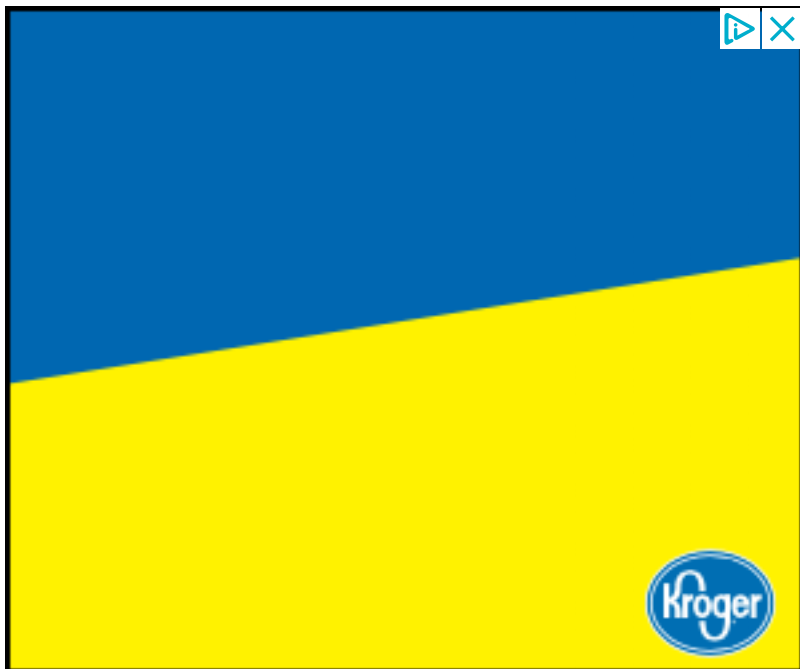
Hollingsworth steadily put together double-digit scoring nights and climbed that list. Zach Greenwell, the team’s sports information director, informed the freshman in early February that he had a chance to overtake Lee.

Hollingsworth tweeted at Lee, telling him he was coming for the school’s freshman scoring record. Then he went out and did it, recording his 462nd point March 13 in a 79-62 NIT victory over Boston College.

The accomplishment came at Diddle Arena, and the home crowd gave Hollingsworth a standing ovation after he broke the record.

Now 506 is the new scoring mark for which WKU freshmen will aim in years to come.

“It really wasn’t much of a goal until I started scoring and Zach started telling me I was coming close to it,” Hollingsworth said. “I told Courtney I was coming for it.”



Breaking that freshman record gives Hollingsworth a great start toward shooting for the program's all-time scoring record. Lee and Jim McDaniels are tied atop WKU's scoring list with 2,238 points.

Hollingsworth figures to become more of a focal point offensively next season thanks to the graduation of Coleby, Johnson and Darius Thompson. He's already more than halfway to 1,000 points, a mark that only 48 Hilltoppers have reached in the program's history.

"Everyone asks me if he's going to break that all-time scoring record held by Courtney Lee and Jim McDaniels," said Johnson, who ranks No. 10 on that scoring list with 1,715 career points. "I said, 'Yeah, if he's here.' He's got the potential to play at the next level and the highest level.

"I've watched guys grow and he's grown up so quick. Most guys go through that freshman slump and they stay in it. His might have been a game."

As good as Hollingsworth was offensively, defense also became a hallmark of his game.

Hollingsworth, as Stansbury has said, didn't play lock-down defense in high school because his Dunbar team couldn't afford him to get in foul trouble. WKU's coach saw his freshman's athleticism and thought he could turn into a quality defender.

Hollingsworth surpassed anyone's defensive expectations and became the Hilltoppers' top perimeter defender. He grabbed 39 steals and consistently defended opponents' top backcourt players. He filled that role well enough to become a finalist for the C-USA Defensive Player of the Year award.

Hollingsworth lost out on that honor to Marshall forward Ajdin Penava. He also lost the C-USA Freshman of the Year race to Texas-San Antonio's Jhivvan Jackson, though he did make the C-USA All-Freshman Team.

Johnson noted Hollingsworth's defensive efforts at Oklahoma State, where he helped force the Cowboys' leading scorer, Jeffrey Carroll, into a 2-of-10 shooting night.

“When you can score 30 and then have an effective defensive night, that’s a good skill set to have,” Johnson said. “The sky’s the limit with him. I can’t wait to come back and see what he does in the future, too.”

Hollingsworth has potentially three seasons left in a WKU uniform, starting in 2018-19 as a sophomore.

Guards Anderson, Ohmer and Lamonte Bearden and forwards Moustapha Diagne and Marek Nelson are also projected to return next season. Transfers Jalen Baker, a walk-on, and Jared Savage will be eligible to play after sitting out the 2017-18 campaign.

Stansbury signed five Class of 2018 prospects in the fall and has the spring recruiting period left to find more future Hilltoppers.

The WKU basketball program appears on an upward trend, with Hollingsworth at the center of it all.

“If he goes and works as hard as he can and just builds off this year moving forward,” Thompson said, “he has the potential to be really, really good – one of the greatest to go down in WKU history.”{&end}

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