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TOP STORY

WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

Hilltoppers post program's highest KenPom ranking in 10 years

C-USA jumps from No. 21 to No. 11 in league rankings

BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com 8 hrs ago

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers forward Justin Johnson (23) smile after WKU's 92-84 win over Oklahoma State on Wednesday, March 21, 2018, at Gallagher-Iba Area in Stillwater, Okla. (Austin Anthony / photo@bgdailynews.com)

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Western Kentucky's on-court basketball product in 2017-18 was its best in 10 years, according to Ken Pomeroy's efficiency ratings.

Coach Rick Stansbury's Hilltoppers checked in at No. 47 in the final KenPom rankings, which were released Monday night after Villanova beat Michigan for the national championship.

It is the third time WKU has made the top 50 of the KenPom ratings, a metric that dates to the 2001-02 season. Coach Dennis Felton's 2001-02 squad finished No. 44 nationally, while coach Darrin Horn's 2007-08 Toppers checked in at No. 43.

WKU finished the 2017-18 season with a KenPom adjusted efficiency margin of +14.45. Only the 2007-08 (+14.60) and 2001-02 (+14.51) Hilltopper teams fared better than that.

WKU jumped nearly 200 spots in the KenPom rankings, from No. 232 (-6.15) in Stansbury's first season to No. 47 (+14.45) in his second. A comparison of those figures suggests the 2017-18 Toppers would be favored by more than 20 points in a game against the program's 2016-17 team.

WKU ranked No. 40 this season offensively with 114.5 points per possession, adjusted for opponent. That's the Tops' best offensive efficiency number in the history of the KenPom ratings, though Horn's 2004-05 team finished higher in the rankings at No. 31 (112.8).

WKU completed the 2017-18 season with a 27-11 record. The Hilltoppers finished third in the Conference USA regular-season standings, lost to Marshall in the C-USA title game and advanced to the National Invitation Tournament semifinals.

C-USA as a whole also enjoyed a leap in the KenPom conference rankings.

Conference USA finished 11th of 32 Division I conferences, sporting a +0.63 adjusted efficiency margin of a team expected to go .500 in league play. That ranking comes one season after C-USA ranked No. 21 of 32 D-I conferences in 2016-17 with a -3.79 rating.

C-USA ranked the second-highest of any D-I league that sent only a single team to the NCAA Tournament. The Missouri Valley Conference, another one-bid league, ranked No. 9 with a +3.96 rating.

C-USA was buoyed in 2017-18 by putting five teams in the top 110 of the rankings: Middle Tennessee (No. 45), WKU (No. 47), Old Dominion (No. 64), Marshall (No. 105) and Alabama-Birmingham (No. 109).

C-USA's No. 11 finish in the KenPom conference rankings was its highest since also finishing No. 11 in 2012-13. The league lost Houston, Memphis, Southern Methodist and Central Florida to the newly formed American Athletic Conference the following offseason.

WKU faces national champion for 8th time

Villanova on Monday became the eighth team to win a national championship during a season in which it squared off against Western Kentucky.

The Wildcats beat the Hilltoppers 66-58 on Nov. 22 in the opening round of the Battle 4 Atlantis.

Villanova guard Jalen Brunson, recently named AP National Player of the Year, scored a game-best 18 points that day in Paradise Island, Bahamas. Darius Thompson had 16 points for WKU, which led in the first half before the Wildcats took control.

Other title winners the Hilltoppers have faced at some point during their championship seasons include Louisville (2012-13), Kentucky (2011-12), Florida (2006-07), Louisville (1985-86), Georgetown (1983-84), Louisville (1979-80) and Ohio State (1959-60). The Cardinals' 2012-13 title was later vacated.

Villanova's men's national title came one day after Notre Dame claimed the women's championship. The Fighting Irish beat the WKU women in November at E.A. Diddle Arena.

This season marks the second time WKU's men's and women's teams have played their sports' respective champions in the same season. The other occurrence was in 1985-86 when the Hilltoppers faced Louisville and the Lady Toppers played Texas.

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