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TOP STORY

WKU WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

# Loyalty helps Collins land Lady Topper coaching job

Longtime assistant officially named WKU women's basketball head coach

ELLIOTT PRATT [epratt@bgdailynews.com](mailto:epratt@bgdailynews.com) 15 hrs ago



He was nowhere to be found.

Western Kentucky had just beaten Middle Tennessee at E.A. Diddle Arena two years ago, and athletic director Todd Stewart sought to congratulate every member of the Lady Topper basketball team.

Except he couldn't find Greg Collins, the team's longtime assistant and associate head coach.

Stewart ventured back to the women's basketball offices where he found Collins – not 15 minutes after the game's conclusion – breaking down film of the next opponent.

“That is the best (example) in terms of how completely invested he is in every aspect of our program and how dedicated and loyal he is and how ready he is to be a head coach,” Stewart said. “Thank goodness it's here.”

Stewart recalled that story to wrap up a day where he introduced Collins as a first-time head coach. WKU announced last week and made it official on Wednesday the hiring of Collins as the 11th head coach of the WKU women's basketball team.

Collins replaces Michelle Clark-Heard, who left to take the Cincinnati job last week after coaching WKU to 154 wins and four NCAA Tournament appearances in the last six seasons.

Working as the right-hand man to Heard was Collins, who held the title of associate head coach the past four seasons.

For 16 years, Collins has been an assistant with stops at Louisville and Arkansas before joining Heard's first staff in 2012.

Ever since, Collins has been the man behind the scenes of WKU's dominance in Conference USA. Stewart said during the news conference Wednesday at E.A. Diddle Arena that it feels like WKU has had two head coaches the past six seasons.

The dedication and loyalty Collins showed to WKU's program made promoting him to head coach an easy decision, Stewart said.

As responsible as Collins is for the Lady Toppers' success, he knows moving into the head coach's office and switching seats on the bench is a much more complex move than it may seem.

"My father was a principal for 22 years and I can still hear him telling his assistant principals it's a lot farther than 6 feet across that hallway," Collins said. "I know it's a lot more than 12 inches when you change chairs. I understand that. I also know in the last six years that Michelle and I worked really close together. There's not a whole lot of changes from what we do. We worked really hard to make sure this thing got back right.

"We worked really hard to get the players in here and get the right schedule and we won ball games. That won't change."

Collins helped Heard turn around a program coming off a school-record 21 losses in the 2011-12 season. They turned WKU into a team with 21 wins the next season and ever since, have won at least 24 games. WKU has won four conference championships in that run but has yet to make it past the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

WKU went 24-9 last season, earned a No. 11 seed in the NCAA Tournament and lost in the first round to Oregon State.

When it became apparent that Heard could land on the coaching market, Stewart knew Collins was the coach he wanted to carry the program moving forward. Talks began in 2017 that Collins would be the successor, which made the transition swift when Heard accepted the Cincinnati job March 26. It wasn't 30 minutes after the university announced Heard's resignation that it also named Collins the next coach.

Shortly after Heard's introductory news conference last week in Cincinnati, she told the Daily News that Collins' latest appointment has been a long time coming.



"I definitely think it's overdue," Heard told the Daily News last week. "I'm really thankful for him sticking with me for six years and we were able to do what we were able to do. I think it's the perfect scenario. We're both blessed. I'm blessed to come back to this situation and being in a conference where we have an opportunity to get an at-large. He's in a situation where it's his first time and a very familiar situation. I think it's a win-win."

A coach with background as a former WNBA scout and longtime assistant with two Power 5 programs, Collins could've likely left WKU at any point to chase a head coaching opportunity.

But happiness and not wanting to uproot family for the sake of a job kept the Collins family in Bowling Green.

“My personal belief has never been to bounce for family reasons,” Collins said. “I wanted to be somewhere I wanted to be. We were happy here. We like Bowling Green, we love Western and the kids are happy. I wasn’t willing to pursue a head coaching job and take a chance of being unhappy in life. We were happy here and weren’t going to change that.

“I had a great working relationship with coach Heard and we were winning ball games. Sometimes when you’re winning, it’s good to stay put.”

It’s not the first time Stewart solved a coaching vacancy with a no-brainer promotion. When Bobby Petrino left as WKU’s football coach after one season in 2013, Stewart quickly promoted then-offensive coordinator Jeff Brohm as head coach. Brohm led WKU to three straight bowl wins and two C-USA championships before taking the Purdue job.

In a similar sense, Stewart feels strongly that Collins can keep the momentum rolling for the Lady Topper basketball team.

“Players and former players would speak to this: Anybody around our program knew how involved he truly was in every aspect of our program,” Stewart said. “I was able to witness that. ... If this was a blind resume and nobody even knew who Greg Collins was and we put that resume out there with his background and to introduce this person as the new head coach, people would be thrilled.

“I’m thrilled because of what he did before he was here and certainly what he’s done since he’s been here.”

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# Elliott Pratt

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