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WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

Hilltoppers learn lesson about 'complacency' with loss at UTSA

Stansbury, players say WKU lacked mental focus Saturday in San Antonio

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Texas-San Antonio guard George Willborn (right) shoots past Western Kentucky's Taveion Hollingsworth on Saturday during the Roadrunners' 74-63 win at the Convocation Center in San Antonio, Texas. (Tom Reel/Express-News)

TOM REEL/Express-News

SAN ANTONIO – Western Kentucky’s loss Saturday to Texas-San Antonio didn’t just start when the ball tipped off.

There was an attitude of “complacency” that coach Rick Stansbury said he sensed in the lead-up to the game.

“I talked about it at shootaround, talked about it (Friday) night,” Stansbury said. “We think that winning just happens by showing up, that we’re good enough to show up and beat anybody. That’s not the way it is.”

The Hilltoppers (16-7 overall, 8-2 Conference USA) fell in an early hole Saturday and never recovered. The Roadrunners (13-11, 6-5) led for nearly 39 minutes and cruised to a 74-63 victory at the Convocation Center.

WKU guard Darius Thompson chalked the loss up to the Toppers' "approach to the game."

"We didn't come in focused," the graduate senior said. "I think we were getting a little complacent with where we were.

"We came out and played like that and they came out and punched us in the mouth."

Forward Justin Johnson echoed Stansbury and Thompson in using "complacency" or "complacent" in his description of WKU's team.

"Some things have got to change in the locker room," the senior Johnson said. "It goes to show right there, you get complacent and you get beat."

Complacency is defined as being "marked by self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies," per Merriam-Webster.

That definition fits what Johnson, Thompson and Stansbury all said was the Hilltoppers' attitude heading into Saturday's matchup in San Antonio.

WKU came in Saturday winners of nine of its last 10 contests and five straight games overall. The Tops hadn't lost on the road over their first four C-USA games, though they weren't able to put away Texas-El Paso on Thursday until the very end of a 72-60 win.

WKU entered Saturday ranked No. 45 overall in KenPom.com's adjusted efficiency metric. The Roadrunners were all the way down at No. 180 and were made seven-point underdogs by odds makers.

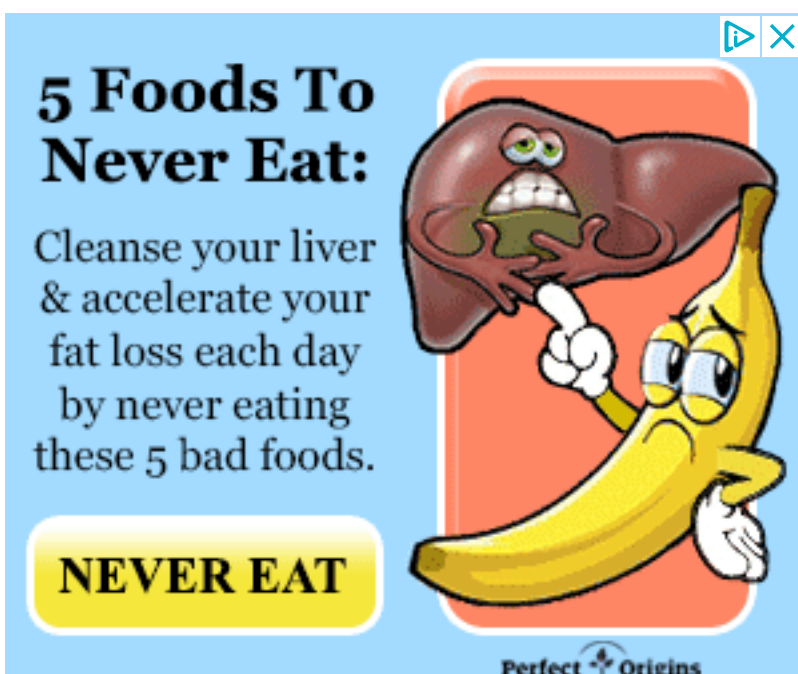
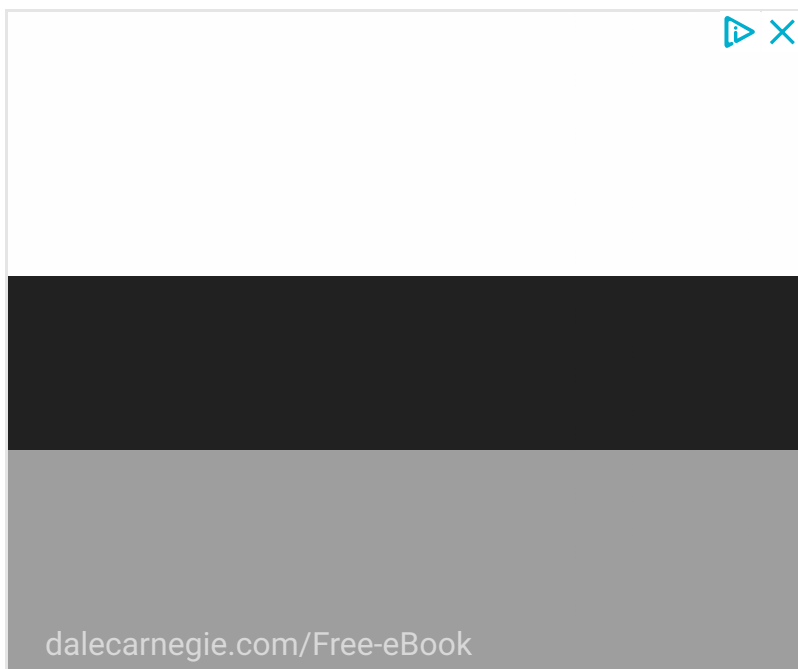
But UTSA came in with the right defensive game plan, packing defenders in the paint to discourage drives to the basket and make life hard on forwards Justin Johnson and Dwight Coleby.

WKU still held a 28-26 edge in points in the paint, but the Hilltoppers were limited well below their average of 40.7 points per game in that category.

The Roadrunners' zone defense put the onus on WKU shooters to hit shots from the outside. The Toppers had plenty of open looks but hit hardly any of them, going 2-for-20 (10 percent) on 3-point shots.

Guard Taveion Hollingsworth (2-for-4) made WKU's only two 3s of the afternoon. Guard Jake Ohmer was 0-for-6, Johnson and Thompson were each 0-for-4 and guards Josh Anderson and Lamonte Bearden were both 0-for-1.

"I guess we need to get in the gym more and work on knocking down shots, being able to finish and score the ball," Thompson said.



Stansbury pointed to a 17-of-30 (56.7 percent) effort from the foul stripe as an example of his team lacking mental focus. The Hilltoppers succeeded in getting to the line more than UTSA (30 attempts to 20) but didn't take advantage once they got there.

Eight WKU players missed at least one free throw Saturday.

“That’s another bad stat that tells you you’re really not sharp,” Stansbury said. “You’re really not mentally having that edge.”

Saturday’s loss could serve as a wake-up call for the Hilltoppers about avoiding complacency and staying mentally sharp for each game, regardless of opponent.

WKU has eight games left in its regular season, starting at 7:30 p.m. Thursday in E.A. Diddle Arena against Florida Atlantic (10-13, 4-7). A 6 p.m. home date Saturday with Florida International (11-13, 5-6) follows that.

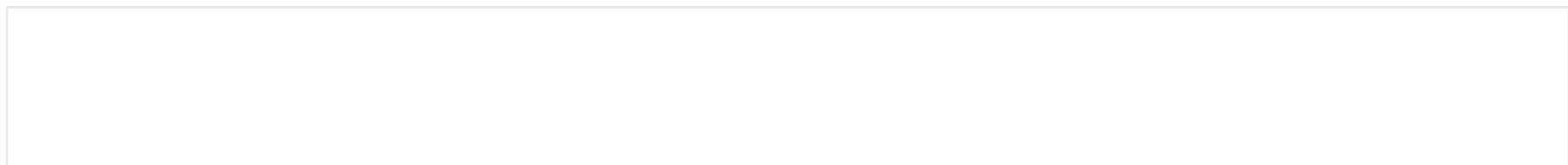
The Owls and Panthers sit in the bottom half of the C-USA standings, but Stansbury can tell his team this week that both teams did something the Hilltoppers couldn't: Win at UTSA. Both FAU and FIU notched road wins last month against the Roadrunners.

WKU should be heavily favored for both matchups. Even after the Tops’ performance Saturday, KenPom projects WKU to beat Florida Atlantic 77-59 and FIU 78-61.

The Hilltoppers were also favored to win at UTSA, and they saw what happened there when a lack of mental focus led to a disappointing road defeat.

“Winning and losing is a fine line and again, we were aware of it and we talked about it,” Stansbury said. “It was very obvious I didn’t do a good job getting them to understand the respect you’ve got to have no matter who you play.”

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VIDEO: WKU men's basketball coach Rick Stansbury
Feb 3, 2018



VIDEO: WKU's Darius Thompson
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VIDEO: WKU's Justin Johnson
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Woeful shooting night dooms Hilltoppers in loss at UTSA

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