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WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

Stansbury calls for another big crowd Saturday vs. Marshall

Team dealing with illness; Diagne still adjusting to D-I basketball

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Western Kentucky Hilltoppers head coach Rick Stansbury walks to the locker room at half time during WKU's 77-69 win over UAB on Thursday, January 18, 2018, at E.A. Diddle Arena. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Austin Anthony

E.A. Diddle Arena was packed Saturday with its biggest crowd in 15 years.

Officials said 7,759 fans showed up to watch Western Kentucky lose 66-62 to Middle Tennessee. Now coach Rick Stansbury wants another big attendance number this week when his team hosts Marshall.

The Hilltoppers (14-6 overall, 6-1 Conference USA) and Thundering Herd (14-6, 5-2) will meet at 6 p.m. Saturday in Diddle Arena.

“There weren’t any basketball atmospheres around the country Saturday night better than what was in Diddle,” Stansbury said Monday on his radio show. “I don’t care where it was at. That was a high level, championship, NCAA-type of atmosphere.

“Two teams going at it, the crowd into it and hanging out of the rafters. Again, that was special. I don’t want it to just be for that game. Saturday night is just as important.”

The 7,759 against MTSU marked Diddle Arena’s second-biggest crowd since its 2002 renovation. That number was topped only by the 8,118 who showed up March 11, 2003, to see WKU face the Blue Raiders in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament.

Other post-renovation crowds of 7,500 or more include Feb. 21, 2008, vs. South Alabama (7,718), Dec. 20, 2014, vs. No. 4 Louisville (7,598) and Dec. 30, 2013 vs. Mississippi (7,523). Diddle Arena’s official capacity is 7,326.

The program has averaged 4,971 fans at its 11 home games so far this season. Last year, WKU drew 3,915 fans over 14 home contests.

Stansbury credited WKU’s students with providing a boost in the atmosphere Saturday against MTSU. The student section officially seats 1,200 and most of it was full 30 minutes before tipoff.

WKU’s coach has stressed getting students to attend games en masse since taking the job in March 2016.

“The students are the ones that create the atmosphere,” Stansbury said. “We need the students up in those (1,200) seats every night.”

That includes Saturday, Stansbury said, when the Toppers host Marshall. It’s a crucial C-USA matchup, with WKU currently in a three-way tie for first place and the Herd just off the pace, sitting one game back in fourth place.

Stansbury reflected on last week’s loss to the Blue Raiders (14-5, 6-1), saying the most disappointing aspect of it was not being able to win in front of an electric home crowd.

Stansbury pointed to the combination of WKU’s 15 turnovers and 1-of-9 3-point shooting performance, and to Middle Tennessee forward Nick King’s 28 points, as factors in the outcome.

“Again, if everyone told us three weeks ago that we’d be 6-1, we’d have probably taken it, wouldn’t we?” Stansbury said. “We would’ve. But when you’re 6-0, you want to be 7-0.

“We had a chance to separate ourselves against Middle, a chance to take a two-game lead on them. We just didn’t capitalize on that moment.”

Team dealing with illness

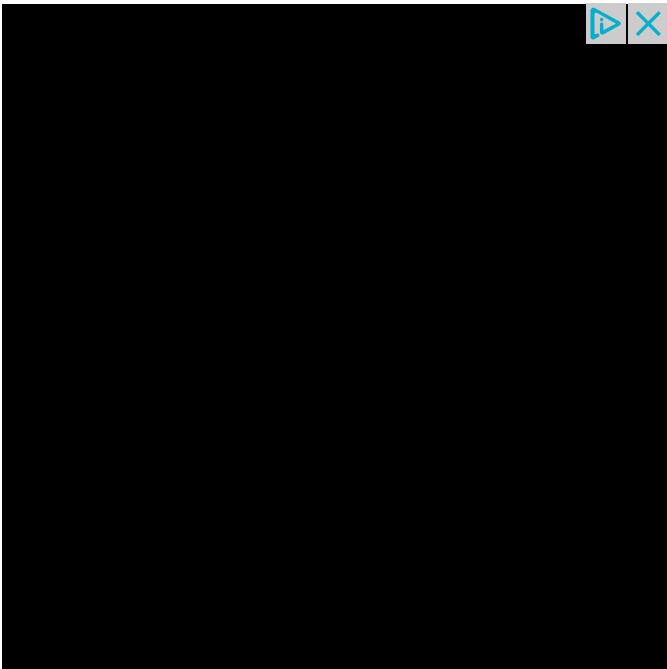
WKU’s matchup Saturday with Marshall, its C-USA travel partner, is the team’s only game this week. That’s a good thing for the Hilltoppers, who are fighting illness off the court.

Guard Darius Thompson was ill Saturday for the MTSU game. The graduate senior played 30 minutes but didn't play to his normal standards, scoring four points – well below his average of 14.7 points per game.

"I didn’t realize he was sick until we got into the game, then I found out he had told everyone before the game that his stomach was killing him," Stansbury said. "It’s very obvious Darius wasn’t himself."

Stansbury then said Monday that guards Lamonte Bearden and Jake Ohmer were also sick.

In response, WKU was set to “fumigate” its locker room Monday night with hopes of eradicating any more germs, Stansbury said.



The hope is to get everyone back to full health in time for tipoff Saturday.

“We bought all the Lysol stuff they had at Walmart.” Stansbury said. “We’ve got all of our players some wipes and hand stuff, just do what we can to avoid it. It doesn’t take much.

“Again, thank goodness we don’t have a game on Thursday now. Let’s get through it and put it behind us.”

Diagne still adjusting to D-I basketball

Moustapha Diagne's stats haven't been much to see through his first four Division I basketball games.

The redshirt sophomore forward, a transfer from Northwest Florida State College, is averaging 0.5 points and 2.5 rebounds over 9.5 minutes per game. He's turned the ball over three times, is 1-for-6 from the field and 0-for-1 from 3-point range.

Stansbury chalked up some of his struggles to the competition he's faced since the NCAA cleared him Jan. 10. Three of the four games he's played have come against Old Dominion, Alabama-Birmingham and MTSU – all squads with physical and veteran frontcourts.

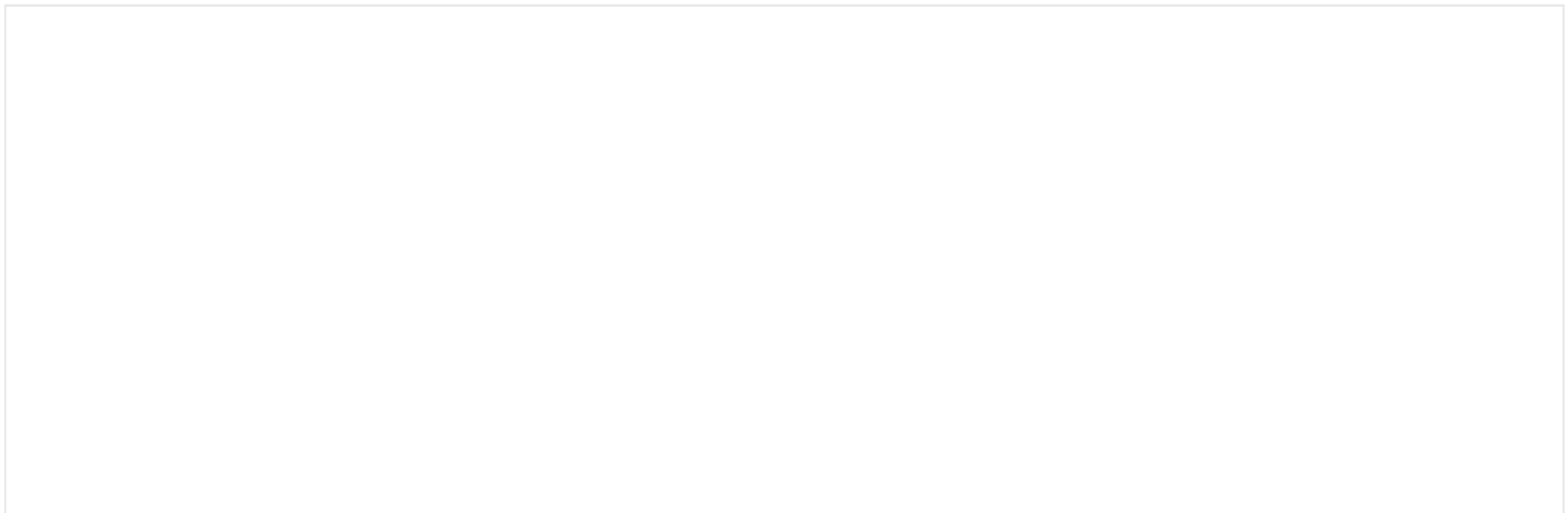
Then combine that with the fact that Diagne, 6-foot-9, hadn't played any games since March 2016 until earlier this month. That creates a thick layer of rust, Stansbury said.

“We've just got to get him in the flow, get his confidence, let the game slow down for him mentally,” Stansbury said of the Rufisque, Senegal, native. “Right now the game is moving for him so fast, which it would be for anybody. ...

“He hasn't played in two years. So it's harder for him than anybody now. But I can promise you this, with his work ethic and his attitude, he'll work his way through it. He'll find ways to get better.”

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