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WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

Anderson's addition boosts thin Hilltopper roster

WKU played 15 games with 8 players available before NCAA deemed guard eligible

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Josh Anderson

WKU Athletics

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HUNTINGTON, W.Va. – Western Kentucky through its first 15 games was a promising team with one glaring weakness: its depth.

After playing their first half of the regular season with only eight players available, the Hilltoppers caught a break Friday. The NCAA cleared freshman Josh Anderson shortly before WKU's trip to Marshall for a Saturday showdown.

Anderson didn't waste any time making an impact. The 6-foot-6 guard scored 16 points in 19 minutes Saturday as WKU (11-5 overall, 3-0 Conference USA) pasted the Thundering Herd by a 112-87 margin.

"Phenomenal," WKU guard Darius Thompson said of Anderson. "He was winded, but he came out and had 16 points, had some big energy plays, big dunks, sat down and defended. He's a huge addition and he's going to really help us the rest of the year."

Anderson's addition has helped alleviate what coach Rick Stansbury's referred to all season as his team's thin margin for error.

WKU was limited to seven scholarship players – Thompson, Lamonte Bearden, Dwight Coleby, Taveion Hollingsworth, Justin Johnson, Marek Nelson and Jake Ohmer – and walk-on Tyler Miller on its roster the first two months of the season.

The Topper roster took hits in the offseason because of the departures of Jordan Brangers and Mitchell Robinson. Robinson Idehen, who was scheduled to join the team after the fall 2017 semester ended, also left, transferring to a junior college.

Meanwhile, two who did stick around, Anderson and Moustapha Diagne, started the year on the bench as the NCAA investigated eligibility questions surrounding both players. For the forward Diagne, those questions have concerned his amateurism status, and he still hasn't been cleared as of Monday morning.

As for Anderson, the NCAA examined the Baton Rouge, La., native's high school coursework. After investigating the matter for months, college sports' governing body declared Anderson immediately eligible Friday afternoon.

Anderson on Saturday thanked those that stuck by him during the process.

"My teammates and a lot of fans in Diddle (Arena) were giving me a lot of encouraging words," Anderson said. "I appreciate them."

Stansbury was just as thrilled when he received the news.

"I don't know who had the best reaction, him or me," Stansbury said. "You know, it's been a bad situation. We'll never understand why he missed 15 games through this.

"But again, he handled it well. He's got himself to this point now and I'm proud for him, his family and everyone else around him that he was able to finally get on the court and do what he loves to do."

Anderson was a consensus four-star recruit coming out of Madison Prep Academy in Baton Rouge. He was ranked in the top 60 by all major recruiting outlets and, when he stepped on the court Saturday at the Cam Henderson Center, he became the highest-rated recruit to play for WKU in the modern era.

Anderson flashed his promise by going 6-of-8 from the field, throwing down a couple of exciting dunks, playing strong defense and avoiding a single turnover in his 19 minutes.

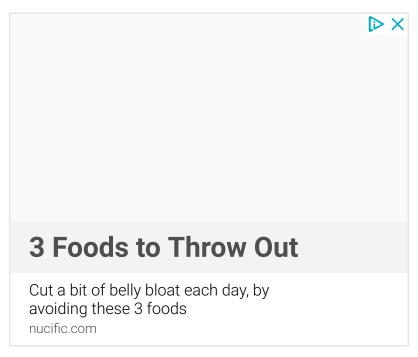
"He had a big smile on his face the whole trip," the graduate senior Thompson said. "He's been smiling the whole trip and as a team we've been smiling too, happy that we have one of our brothers out there with us."

Anderson's addition to the active roster over the weekend boosted a team that already started the year strong.



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WKU sits at No. 58 of 351 Division I teams in the KenPom.com rankings with an adjusted efficiency margin of +11.38. By comparison, the 2016-17 Hilltoppers finished No. 232 (-6.15) in that metric.

WKU's pre-Anderson resume included Battle 4 Atlantis victories over a Purdue team now ranked No. 5 in KenPom and a Southern Methodist squad now ranked No. 34.

Even with the strong start, the Tops' roster situation didn't leave much wiggle room.

The guard Bearden sprained an ankle in preseason practice in October but was able to recover in time for WKU's season opener Nov. 10 against Missouri State. The forward Coleby got in bad foul trouble during that game though, and the Hilltoppers lost 85-80.

| The depth issues showed again Dec. 22 at Austin Peay, as the guard Ohmer sat after | | | |
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| suffering a concussion the previous game. The walk-on guard Miller picked up some of | | | |
| that slack by playing a career-high 18 minutes, and WKU won 72-55. | | | |
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Other than Ohmer at APSU, the Toppers stayed lucky on the injury front. None of WKU's other seven available players missed any of the team's first 15 games due to injuries.

And the Hilltoppers have done well all season avoiding foul trouble. WKU ranks No. 23 in the country at opponent's free throw attempts per field goal attempts (25.1 percent), according to KenPom.

By staying healthy and avoiding foul trouble, the Tops dodged the worst of the roster crises that could've come with carrying only eight eligible players through 15 games. Now Anderson's clearance has eased some of that pressure.

"Just that extra body helps us," Stansbury said. "We've made it to this point with (eight) bodies. That's what we've had. It isn't easy.

"Particularly when you go on the road, stuff gets magnified. Getting one more body and one more body that's a good player helps us tremendously."

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■ 3:32 VIDEO: WKU coach Rick Stansbury on the NCAA clearing Josh Anderson Daily News Jan 6, 2018

■ 2:43 VIDEO: WKU guard Darius Thompson on his triple-double Daily News Jan 6, 2018



Thompson's triple-double highlights Hilltoppers' trouncing of Marshall

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