

http://www.bgdailynews.com/sports/wku/bassey-s-enrollment-continues-momentum-for-stansbury-s-hilltoppers/article_b9d56bc4-2149-583e-871d-9c3da5635bf6.html

TOP STORY

WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

Bassey's enrollment continues momentum for Stansbury's Hilltoppers

Program coming off 27-win season features talented 2018-19 roster

BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com 1 hr ago

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers head coach Rick Stansbury tells his players to get back on defense during WKU's 57-49 win over ODU on Friday, March 9, 2018, at The Ford Center at The Star. (Austin Anthony / photo@bgdailynews.com)

Buy Now

Austin Anthony/Daily News

LOUISVILLE – Rick Stansbury had an ambitious vision for Western Kentucky when he took the job in March 2016.

Stansbury wanted to build a Hilltopper program that could compete with anyone in the country. He spoke of winning championships and filling E.A. Diddle Arena, saying there'd "come a time real soon" when tickets would all be sold out.

Two years into his tenure, Stansbury has WKU rolling toward those goals.

The latest victory came last week, when five-star center Charles Bassey reclassified into the Class of 2018, signed with the Toppers and enrolled in school. Kansas and UCLA were among the schools that offered scholarships to Bassey, but Stansbury was the coach who landed him.

Speaking Monday at an event hosted by the WKU Greater Louisville Alumni Chapter, Stansbury brushed off the notion that people should be surprised Bassey chose the Hilltoppers.

“Why is anyone shocked?” Stansbury asked. “Why shouldn’t he be at Western Kentucky?”

“There’s a lot of those schools that get five or six guys a year. Right? So why shouldn’t one of the best players in the country go to a program that traditionally is as good as anybody in the country?”

Stansbury talks up WKU’s rich tradition – 42 conference titles, 1,775 victories, 44 20-win seasons.

The Tops' program was in a rut though when the Battletown native took the job 27 months ago.

WKU went 18-16 in 2015-16 and average attendance at E.A. Diddle Arena dropped to 3,672 – the lowest figure since the building’s 2002-03 renovation set the capacity at 7,326. Meanwhile, off-court problems left the program void of returning guards for the 2016-17 campaign.

“When our job opened up two years ago, and we’ve talked about that, our program was in a really bad spot,” athletic director Todd Stewart said. “We just were, from a roster standpoint and a fan standpoint.

“I felt like (Stansbury) was the guy. We needed somebody who could obviously recruit, someone who could coach, someone who was an experienced winner but also someone who gave hope to our fans because I felt like we really needed that. Fortunately, with Rick Stansbury, you go 4-for-4 in those areas.”

The Hilltoppers went 15-17 during a forgettable 2016-17 campaign. Stansbury inherited a flawed roster and, despite adding three graduate transfers, WKU never contended for a Conference USA title.

But the Toppers took off last season. WKU posted 27 wins, beat five teams from top-seven leagues, nearly won the C-USA Tournament title and advanced to the National Invitation Tournament semifinals.

Purdue, Southern Methodist, Boston College, Southern California and Oklahoma State were among the schools the Hilltoppers defeated last season.

WKU averaged 5,487 fans last season over 17 home games, including a first-round NIT victory over Boston College, an Atlantic Coast Conference squad. Spectators filled Diddle Arena past its listed capacity for games against Marshall, Middle Tennessee and Old Dominion.

Fans fell in love with a tight-knit Hilltopper squad that featured program great Justin Johnson, key grad transfer additions Dwight Coleby and Darius Thompson and star freshman Taveion Hollingsworth.

“It was a fun team because we had good people,” Stansbury said. “That’s why it mixed so well. It wasn’t all about being pros. There maybe wasn’t a pro on that team.





“But we were able to put them together. We had some rhythm, we had some continuity with them and we were able to go places and beat some pretty good people and have some success with it.”

Now Stansbury is building on that success. He signed a five-man fall signing class that featured four-star guard Dalano Banton and then added Auburn grad transfer Desean Murray this spring.

WKU was already expected to be one of the best teams in C-USA this year with players like Banton, Hollingsworth, Murray, Josh Anderson, Lamonte Bearden and Jared Savage on the roster. Then Stansbury went last week and added Bassesey.

Bassesey’s reclassification, signing and enrollment was the result of a relationship that dates to when he first arrived from Nigeria as a teenager.

Stansbury has described Bassesey as a tenacious rebounder and willing defender who’s developing his offensive game.

“He brings a lot to our program besides just being a guy that has a chance to be a really good player,” Stansbury said. “He’s a terrific person. When you get those kind of guys that can play a little bit and they’re great people, those are the kinds of guys you want to coach.”

Bassesey’s addition has continued the WKU program’s momentum heading into the 2018-19 campaign.

Fans have bought into that vision as well. Matt Morrison, WKU's associate AD for marketing and ticket sales, told the Daily News on Wednesday that his office has received 400 new requests for basketball season tickets. That's in addition to those who renewed season tickets they already owned.

The Hilltoppers are in position this season with a talented roster to play in front of big home crowds and compete for a C-USA title and NCAA Tournament berth.

“You’ve got great tradition, great fan support, great facilities, we’ve got a great president (Timothy Caboni) and AD,” Stansbury said. “Why can’t we be as good as anybody right there? ... We can.”

– Follow Daily News sports reporter Brad Stephens on Twitter @BradBGDN or visit bgdailynews.com.



VIDEO: WKU AD Todd Stewart on basketball scheduling
BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Jun 19, 2018



VIDEO: WKU AD Todd Stewart on the 100th year of Hilltopper basketball, football
BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Jun 19, 2018



VIDEO: WKU coach Rick Stansbury on finding continuity in recruiting
BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Jun 19, 2018

5:30

VIDEO: WKU coach Rick Stansbury on the new Conference USA scheduling format
BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Jun 19, 2018

5:08

VIDEO: WKU coach Rick Stansbury on Charles Bassey's toughness
BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Jun 19, 2018

5:07

VIDEO: WKU coach Rick Stansbury on wanting to play in-state schools
BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com Jun 19, 2018

MORE INFORMATION

Hilltoppers' Anderson working this offseason on playing PG

Bassey joins deep group of frontcourt newcomers

Class of '19 guard Harlan commits to WKU

Brad Stephens

Bowling Green Daily News sports reporter primarily covering Western Kentucky football and men's basketball.