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WKU WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Lady Toppers expect 'steep learning curve' in nonconference schedule

WKU to play two teams from NCAA Final Four

ELLIOTT PRATT epratt@bgdailynews.com 1 hr ago



Western Kentucky's new women's basketball head coach Greg Collins (left) and athletic director Todd Stewart speak Wednesday during an introductory news conference at E.A. Diddle Arena.

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Greg Collins isn't expecting his first several games as the Western Kentucky women's basketball coach to be cupcakes.

That's no longer the expectation he helped build, anyway.

The first-year head coach chuckled when the first portion of the 2018-19 schedule featuring two Final Four teams was brought to his attention.

"We're going to have a really steep learning curve and we'll see where it goes," Collins told the Daily News in May. "I think we've got kids that are excited about that schedule."

WKU's first four games this fall will be against Louisville, Oklahoma, Iowa and Central Michigan. Later in the nonconference slate is a road game with defending national champion Notre Dame and a home game with two-time defending Sun Belt Conference champ Arkansas-Little Rock.

WKU opens the season at home against Louisville, travels to Oklahoma, hosts Iowa and travels to Central Michigan. Dates will be released with the full schedule later this summer.

"Those are the kinds of teams we need to play," Collins said. "The biggest challenge is we're playing that team and we don't have Ivy Brown and Tashia Brown and we're playing those teams right off the bat."

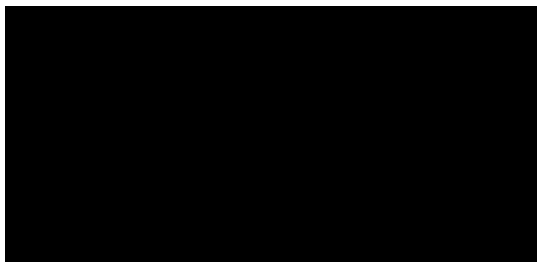
By scheduling top Power 5 competition, the Lady Toppers at least give themselves a chance to crack into the Associated Press Top 25 and earn an RPI respectable enough for a potential at-large bid for the NCAA Tournament.

But reality is life in Conference USA rarely works that way. Just like the approach former coach Michelle Clark-Heard took with scheduling, Collins realizes scheduling tough prepares WKU to win at least three games in three days in March at the C-USA tournament to get the league's automatic bid with a championship.

WKU has won that title three of the last four seasons. Since Collins and Heard took over at WKU in 2012, the Lady Toppers are 0-4 in the NCAA Tournament.

The obvious challenge, as Collins noted, is doing it without the Browns, who graduated with 52 percent of WKU's scoring last season.

The responsibility now falls on senior guard Sidnee Bopp, juniors Whitney Creech, Dee Givens and Alexis Brewer to lead five other expected returners.



Of those first four teams, WKU has played Louisville the most recently, going 1-3 against the Cardinals since 2013. WKU and Oklahoma have met just once – a 1985 win for the Big 12 team at E.A. Diddle Arena.

WKU and Iowa will meet for the second straight year after the Hawkeyes edged WKU in overtime in the second game of the season at the Hawkeye Challenge in 2017.

The Lady Toppers' fourth game sends them to Michigan for their first game against CMU. The Chippewas won the Mid-American Conference tournament last year, advanced to the Sweet 16 and finished 20th in the final AP poll.

Later in the nonconference schedule is UALR at home, a familiar opponent from WKU's days in the Sun Belt Conference. Then WKU completes a home-and-home series with Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind. The Lady Toppers lost to the Fighting Irish at home by 13 points in the third game of last season.

More information about the 2018-19 schedule will be released later this summer.

"We're not shying away from the schedule," Collins said. "We're working on the 2019 schedule right now and it'll be similar. That's where we'll need to be, I just don't know how the first month and a half will turn out. We would love to win all those games, or some of those games. Regardless of how those fall, we have to make sure we're improving as a team.

"At the end of the day, this thing comes down to putting yourself in position for the conference tournament to win three games in three days."

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Elliott Pratt

Covering high school sports and Western Kentucky women's basketball for the Bowling Green Daily News.