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WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

## ESPN's Fraschilla: 'Born salesman' Stansbury 'great fit' for Hilltoppers

Analyst praises WKU coach's communication skills, recruiting prowess

BRAD STEPHENS [bstephens@bgdailynews.com](mailto:bstephens@bgdailynews.com) 17 hrs ago

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers head coach Rick Stansbury calls a play during WKU's 92-84 win over Oklahoma State on March 21, 2018, at Gallagher-Iba Area in Stillwater, Okla.

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NEW YORK – Fran Fraschilla looks at Western Kentucky’s team and sees a combination of talent and chemistry.

The TV analyst said those two factors make coach Rick Stansbury’s Hilltoppers a contender for this week’s National Invitation Tournament championship.

Fraschilla will call WKU’s NIT semifinal at 6 p.m. CDT Tuesday on ESPN. The No. 4 seed Toppers (27-10) will battle No. 2 seed Utah (22-11) at Madison Square Garden for a spot in Thursday’s NIT title game.

Fraschilla emceed a luncheon Monday at the Marriott Marquis featuring the coaches of the four teams left in the tournament. He spoke with the Daily News beforehand about his observations of WKU.

“They have power-conference talent,” Fraschilla said. “That’s apparent. But also the togetherness ... it looks like a team with great chemistry right now.

“That makes sense because when you’re playing at this time of year, especially when you get over the disappointment of not being in the NCAA Tournament, chemistry takes you a long way. A lot of teams want to put the balls away and not keep playing.”

WKU has played some of its best basketball of the season the last two weeks in NIT wins against Boston College, Southern California and Oklahoma State.

The Hilltoppers convincingly bounced the No. 5 seed Eagles 79-62 at home March 13. Then came back-to-back road victories in a three-day span at the No. 1 seed Trojans on March 19 (79-75) and at the No. 2 seed Cowboys on Wednesday (92-84).

Fraschilla calls Big 12 Conference games and is familiar with the team and atmosphere WKU faced last week at Gallagher-Iba Arena in Stillwater, Okla.

Tops forward Justin Johnson said Saturday that Oklahoma State’s home court “was the best basketball environment I’ve ever played in.”

“Oklahoma State was playing as well in the Big 12 as anybody at the end of the year,” Fraschilla said. “They proved it through two NIT games. From what my TV screen told me, they were jacked up at Gallagher-Iba.

“For Western Kentucky to go in there from the tip and jump out to a lead and not ever lose it says a lot about how they’re playing right now.”

Fraschilla is a former coach at Manhattan (1992-96), St. John’s (1996-98) and New Mexico (1999-2002). He met Stansbury through the coaching circles and has observed him in recent years from his position as an ESPN analyst.

Fraschilla said WKU’s coach possesses “incredible communication skills with young people.” Those have been put to the test with Stansbury piecing together a team of transfers, freshmen and Johnson, the only returning scholarship player from last season.



“You can tell that the coaching hasn’t been just X’s and O’s,” Fraschilla said. “It’s been stuff in the locker room, the travel, the communication when you’ve been together on a trip to the Bahamas or Costa Rica or out to LA.

“Knowing Rick the way I do, it’s not surprising to me that he has great rapport with this team.”

Fraschilla sees Stansbury using this season to launch the WKU program toward bigger things in years to come.

Guards Josh Anderson, Lamonte Bearden and Taveion Hollingsworth highlight the players projected to return for the Hilltoppers next season. Jared Savage, who Stansbury’s praised ever since the guard/forward transferred to WKU last summer from Austin Peay, will be eligible to play.

Stansbury inked a five-man signing class in the fall that included four-star guard/forward Dalano Banton. He'll look to add more pieces to that roster as the spring recruiting period approaches.

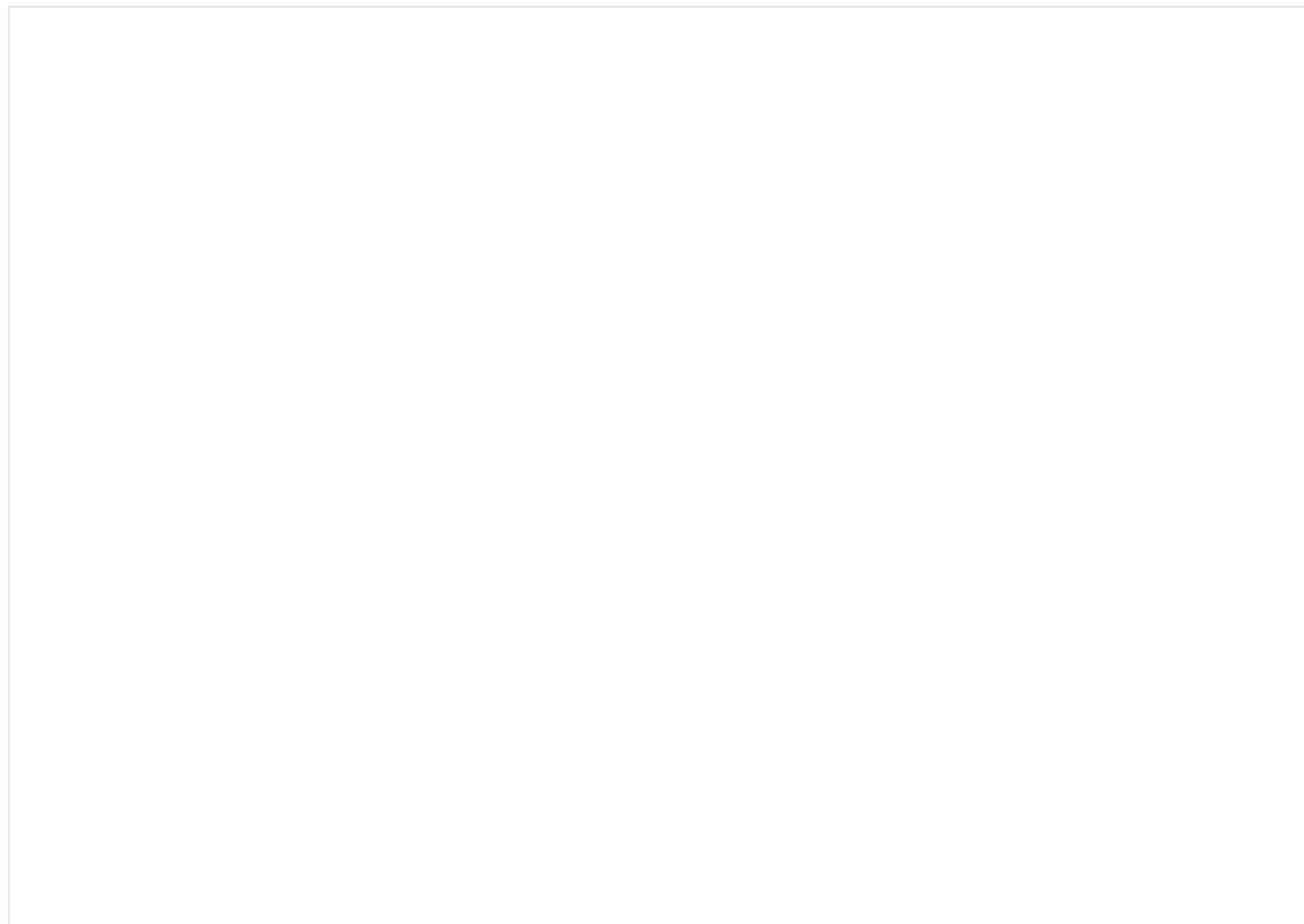
“You know, when they build a recruiting Hall of Fame, Rick is a first-ballot member,” Fraschilla said. “Rick is going to do a great job at Western Kentucky. It’s a great fit for him. He had success at Mississippi State. He’s a Kentucky boy. He understands the culture of Western Kentucky basketball and the rich history.

“He’s not only a great coach but a born salesman. I think that Hilltopper fans are very fortunate that when a coach with his experience bounces back to another job, that this is the job he bounced back to. I think from the outside looking in, he’s a great fit.”

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