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## Building Momentum: Stansbury talks recent success, future of WKU hoops

BY DANIEL SUDDEATH [dsuddeath@glasgowdailytimes.com](mailto:dsuddeath@glasgowdailytimes.com) 15 hrs ago

Western Kentucky basketball coach Rick Stansbury was the guest speaker Thursday during the Glasgow Rotary Club's weekly lunch meeting.

DANIEL SUDDEATH/GLASGOW DAILY TIMES



GLASGOW — During his introductory press conference in 2016 after being hired as Western Kentucky University's head basketball coach, Rick Stansbury made a prediction.

He encouraged people who hadn't purchased tickets to do so, "because there's coming a day real soon where there's not going to be a ticket for sale," Stansbury said Thursday while speaking about the recent success of the Hilltoppers' hoops program and his vision for what they can achieve in the future.

His foreshadowing was correct. Diddle Arena was sold out for four of the Hilltoppers' final five home games last season including back-to-back sellouts for the first time in over a decade.

WKU compiled a 27-11 record including a 14-4 conference mark last season. After losing a heartbreaker to Marshall in the Conference USA Tournament final, the Hilltoppers made an impressive run in the NIT before falling to Utah in the semifinals in Madison Square Garden.

As Stansbury prepares for season three with the Hilltoppers, he's focused on continuing to construct a winning program and fostering the kind of exciting environment that could be found inside of Diddle Arena down the stretch of last season.

"We're going to keep building on what we've started here," said Stansbury, who was the guest speaker during the Glasgow Rotary Club's weekly meeting on Thursday.

One of the most successful seasons in recent history for the Hilltoppers started with uncertainty. Heralded 5-Star recruit Mitchell Robinson enrolled late in the summer before leaving the program after just two weeks. Robinson had a change of heart and came back to the team, but the reunion was short-lived and the Louisiana native left in September for good.

But when one door closes, sometimes another one opens.

Taveion Hollingsworth, a former Kentucky high school Mr. Basketball, became a star in Bowling Green last season. He set the school's freshman scoring record, which Stansbury said was even more impressive than it appears because Hollingsworth was considered the team's third or fourth offensive option for most of the season.

"It wasn't like he was that freshman who came in on a really bad team and got a bunch of shots," he said. "If we hadn't gotten him early, Big Blue would have probably tried to get him late."

It was one of many references to the University of Kentucky he made during his remarks. Stansbury emphasized his respect for UK, but added he felt the Hilltoppers would have held their own against any school on a neutral court last season.

"We're not going to take a backseat to anybody in this state," he said.

And WKU had performances to backup Stansbury's assertions.

In November during the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament, WKU lost by eight points to Villanova, who went on to win the NCAA championship. The Hilltoppers defeated Purdue and SMU in the same tournament and lost by just one point to Wisconsin in a road game in December. WKU also

knocked off USC and Oklahoma State on the road in the NIT.

The Hilltoppers leaned on the experience of senior Justin Johnson, and they gelled as a team.

"For our guys to come together and do what they did, they deserve a lot of credit," Stansbury said. "It's just a great group of young men."

After asking for a show of hands from those in attendance Thursday who were Kentucky fans, Stansbury encouraged them to come check out a WKU game. A part of his pitch was that Bowling Green is much closer than Lexington.

"I know you can't get to Rupp Arena every game," he said.

Stansbury — who played high school basketball at Meade County and college basketball at Campbellsville University — said he wants to continue recruiting Kentucky high school players, but only if they have the skills to help the Hilltoppers win games.

Though he won't be eligible to play this season, former Kentucky Mr. Basketball Carson Williams transferred to WKU from Northern Kentucky University in April. Former Warren Central star Jared Savage will be eligible to play this season after transferring to WKU from Austin Peay last year.

Stansbury said Savage is a high-character person who can fill it up on offense.

"He can really shoot the basketball," Stansbury said.

Stansbury answered questions from the audience on different topics including his thoughts on the "one and done" rule. He joked that he'd "like to have that problem," but added he's generally favored the college baseball rule which allows a player to enter the Major League Baseball draft following high school. But if a player signs with a college, he can't declare for the draft until after his junior season.

Stansbury said the graduation transfer rule has "totally changed recruiting," and that his staff is still hard at work recruiting players for the upcoming season and for future years.

The Hilltoppers' 2018 commits are led thus far by Dalano Banton, a 4-star shooting guard from New York.

Western Kentucky will play Saint Mary's, Wisconsin and Arkansas next season. The full schedule has yet to be announced.

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