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WKU FOOTBALL

Sanford: 'Feeding frenzy' led to WKU finally playing complementary football

WKU takes confidence from first C-USA win into Louisiana Tech

ELLIOTT PRATT epratt@bgdailynews.com 17 hrs ago

Western Kentucky defensive back Drell Greene (right) intercepts a pass Saturday, November 17, 2018, next to defensive back Roger Cray during Western Kentucky's win over Texas-El Paso at Houchens-Smith Stadium. (Bac Totrong/photo@bgdailynews.com)

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Complementary football is what Mike Sanford wanted to see for the better part of two years.

Western Kentucky finally found a way to achieve that with defense feeding off the offense and vice versa in a 40-16 win over Texas El-Paso on Saturday.

Now the challenge is duplicating that one last time in 2018.

WKU has one final game on the schedule with a trip to Louisiana Tech on Saturday for an 11 a.m. kickoff. The Hilltoppers (2-9 overall, 1-6 Conference USA) have never won in Ruston, La., and enter the season finale as an 11-point underdog.

Sanford hopes the “feeding frenzy” on display against the Miners can sway help sway WKU’s recent fortunes into a strong finish.

“One of the main factors of how the feeding frenzy started was the defense feeding off our offense’s start,” Sanford said during his weekly news conference Monday. “I think our defense fed off that energy. ...

"We saw a little bit of it in the opening quarter against Maine. Once it got to 27-0, we couldn't pull our foot off the gas and kept going and took it into the half with that same mentality.”

WKU opened with possession and converted a fourth-and-2 in the red zone on Steven Duncan’s touchdown pass to Quin Jernighan, marking WKU’s first time scoring on an opening drive since a loss to Old Dominion on Oct. 20.

The defense then did its part, with Roger Cray intercepting a tipped pass on UTEP’s first play. WKU converted that turnover into points with the first of two of D’Andre Ferby’s touchdown runs. Drell Greene intercepted Kai Locksley on the Miners’ next play, and again the Toppers’ offense found the end zone.

Cray, Greene, Ta’Corian Darden, Devon Key and Gaej Walker – whose pick-six made the score 40-0 – set WKU's FBS- era single-game record with five interceptions. All came before halftime.

Most of those interceptions were credit to the pressure of WKU’s defensive front. The Hilltoppers also had a season-high four sacks in the win.

The offense turning those five INTs into 31 points helped WKU build its biggest lead in the Sanford era.

“It's always exciting to watch your offense go down and score on a long drive, then get a fourth-down conversion,” defensive coordinator Clayton White said. “It definitely got our guys hyped up, they were bouncing around, they were ready to take the field.

"I think that was the most important part of that, how they scored, then (defense) came back and answered back, and then we continued that. Those are the things that, as a team, we haven't been able to kind of accomplish that a lot. But it was great for us to get that

feeling that we can play together and the outcome can be really good for us."

Sanford noted the complementary play was also a credit to Duncan getting in a rhythm with receivers. Saturday was the fourth start at quarterback for the redshirt sophomore and he'll earn the start again to close the year at Louisiana Tech.

Duncan recorded five chunk plays of 15 yards or more in the first quarter. His first touchdown pass to Jernighan went for 17 yards and his 21-yard completion to the receiver set up Ferby's score at the goal line.

Two passes of 38 and 29 yards to Mik'Quan Deane helped set up scores inside the UTEP 10.

Defensively, White said the first interception was credited to Ben Holt tipping the pass based off a key taught by linebacker coach Maurice Crum.

"Knowing that the plays we've been wanting to make, we made," Sanford said. "We made plays in that game and it's because we have playmakers. Just cutting them loose and letting them play and not holding anything back from them and just letting them play with that reckless abandon, it came together.

"The other part of it is take the confidence you attain that last game as an individual playmaker and a collective group of playmakers and bring that on the road."

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Elliott Pratt

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