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TOP STORY

WKU FOOTBALL

## Shanley to start at QB for WKU at Ball State

Blocked FGs an issue for Tops; Sanford doesn't agree with Wiggins ejection

BRAD STEPHENS [bstephens@bgdailynews.com](mailto:bstephens@bgdailynews.com) Sep 17, 2018 Updated 9 hrs ago



Davis Shanley was a spark plug off the bench last week for Western Kentucky. Now he'll get the chance to start a college game for the first time.

Shanley will start at quarterback Saturday when the Hilltoppers (0-3) face Ball State (1-2), coach Mike Sanford said Monday. Kickoff from Muncie, Ind., is set for 2 p.m. CDT, with the game broadcast by ESPN3.

The redshirt freshman Shanley earned the starting job with his performance Saturday in WKU's 20-17 loss to Louisville.

Shanley checked into the game midway through the first quarter and completed 22 of 33 passes for 240 yards. He threw one TD pass to tight end Kyle Fourtenbary, ran for another score and nearly led the 23-point underdog Toppers to a massive win.

"I thought it was one of those games where you have to show your guts a little bit," Sanford said. "Davis stood in there and showed his guts."

Steven Duncan started against UofL and played the game's first two series. He's listed as Shanley's backup this week, with Kevaris Thomas as the third-string QB.

Drew Eckels, who started each of WKU's first two games, is unavailable this week vs. the Cardinals. He was knocked out of both the Wisconsin and Maine losses after taking late hits and was a game-time decision for the contest at Louisville.

"We'll continually evaluate that," Sanford said of the redshirt senior. "There have been improvements in his mobility and his ability to get a full range of motion back in his throwing shoulder."

“To this point, we’re not in a place to say Drew is cleared to play this week. That will be a week-by-week decision.”

Shanley is a 6-foot-1, 190-pound native of Duluth, Ga. He committed to former WKU coach Jeff Brohm in 2016 while he was a senior at South Forsyth High School. The QB tallied 39 passing touchdowns and 15 rushing TDs during his final two years of prep football.

Sanford took over the Hilltopper program in December 2016 and, in putting together his Class of 2017, honored Shanley’s commitment to the prior staff.

The quarterback redshirted in 2017, made his college debut Aug. 31 at Wisconsin and then played 3½ quarters against UofL.

“The one thing I liked about him was that when I watched the film, I saw a guy that played within the system,” Sanford said. “You watch his progressions, his feet, his timing, you can tell this is the system that he’s learned. This is the system he’s been trained in and he played as such.

“It was good to see in a good environment, a big environment, for a redshirt freshman quarterback who hasn’t started his first game. He’ll get his first start this week against Ball State.”

### **Blocked FGs an issue for Tops**

Two blocked field goals in three games have proven costly for WKU.

Kicker Ryan Nuss’ attempt at a game-tying, 48-yard field goal in the final minute Sept. 8 against Maine was blocked. The FCS-level Black Bears then ran out the clock for a 31-28 victory at Houchens-Smith Stadium.

A combination of a high snap and low angle on the kick – which was necessary for the long distance – contributed to that block, Sanford said.

Then Saturday, Nuss had a 32-yard attempt blocked in the third quarter. The ball bounced into WKU territory before the Cardinals recovered it at the 31-yard line.

Louisville drove the rest of the way into the end zone for an early fourth-quarter TD. The Hilltoppers were looking at a 17-7 lead when they lined up for the 32-yard kick. But after the block and ensuing Cards touchdown, WKU's lead was instead cut to 14-13.

Sanford said Saturday after the loss that the blocked field goal was a turning point in the game. After reviewing film, he spoke about the play Monday.

"It was a combination of some factors," Sanford said. "We've got to be more firm in our protection on this one. Louisville did have some of those 6-6 body types that, if you get a little push and hand up, that ball's got to get over their hands.

"From that position, it's got to be more of a sand wedge-type shot. It's not your driven, 51-yard field goal. You've got to get that ball up and down."

With those two blocked kicks in mind, Sanford said the Tops are putting extra emphasis on field goal protection this week in practice.





WKU coaches will line up 15 players against the team's 11-man field goal unit.

"It's going to make sure that every single gap on your field goal protection unit is being challenged," Sanford said.

Foam practice bags will also be held in the air to encourage higher kick angles, Sanford said.

Nuss is 2-of-5 on field goal attempts this season. The makes came from 25 yards at Wisconsin and 35 yards at Louisville. The misses have come on the two blocks and on a 51-yard attempt that missed just to the right as time expired in Saturday's loss.

"That unit needs to be an automatic score-team unit," Sanford said. "We've got to get back to that place where we know that unit is being tested in practice, so we can go out there and play flawlessly and execute. I haven't lost hope in that unit."

**Sanford: Wiggins ejection 'makes no sense to me'**

WKU defensive end Heath Wiggins was ejected early in Saturday's loss after being called for targeting on punt coverage. Sanford said Monday that after reviewing the film, he didn't see how Wiggins could've been flagged.

The play came on a Hilltopper punt midway through the first quarter. Wiggins was in pursuit of Louisville's Rodjay Burns, who was in the midst of a 36-yard return to the WKU 40.

Wiggins turned toward Burns when he was struck by a Cardinal punt return team member. The players' helmets collided.

After a lengthy replay review, officials ruled that Wiggins targeted the UofL player. The redshirt junior was disqualified for the game, issuing a blow to WKU's D-line and special teams depth.

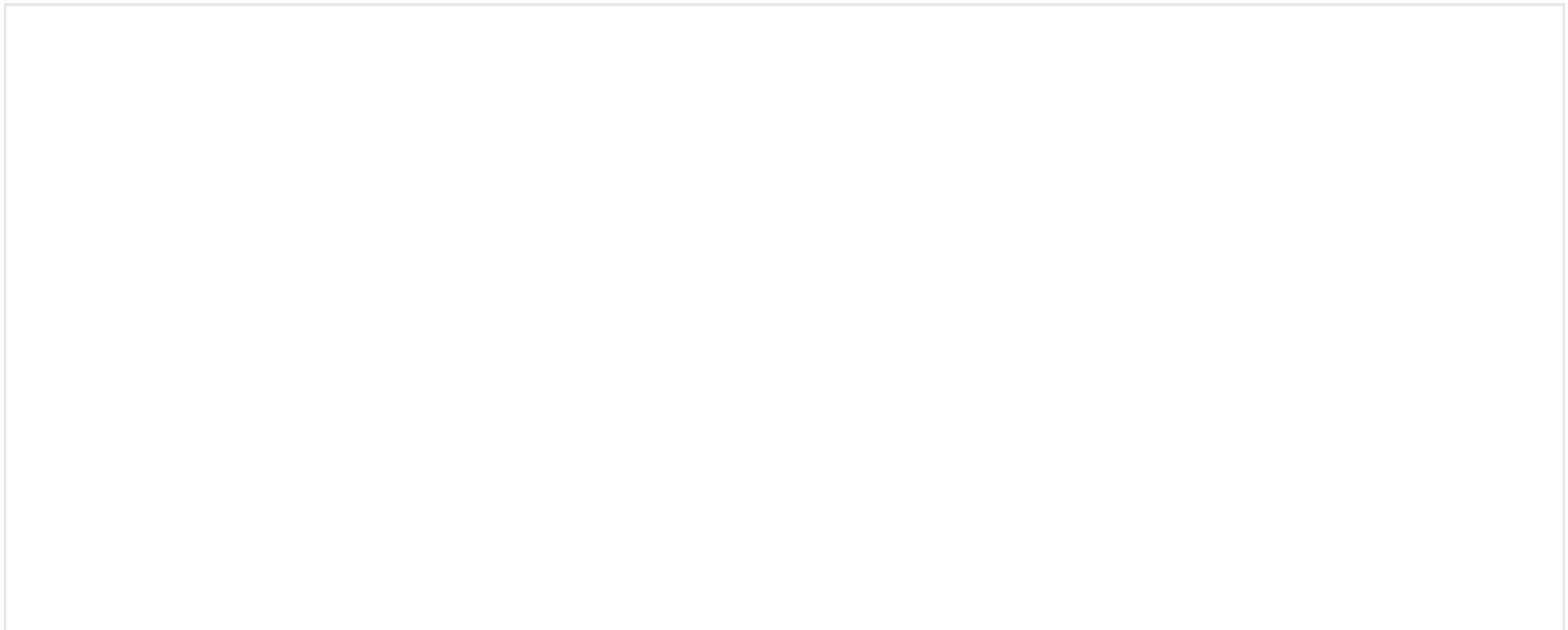
A 15-yard penalty moved the Cardinals all the way to the Toppers' 25. The yardage effects were nullified though when WKU defensive end DeAngelo Malone grabbed his first career interception on the next play.

"There was a crack-back block coming at Heath, and Heath doesn't see him out of the corner of his eye," Sanford said. "At the last second, Heath sees him and kind of gets his head on a swivel.

"It's a true helmet-to-helmet from the blocker, and (Wiggins) is the one who gets ejected for targeting. It makes no sense to me. I don't understand that ruling."

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# Brad Stephens

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