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WKU VOLLEYBALL

Freshman Isenbarger fills void for thin Lady Toppers

WKU to host 3 teams at home Friday and Saturday

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Katie Isenbarger hasn't been eased into college volleyball. With roster attrition affecting Western Kentucky, coach Travis Hudson has put the freshman on the court early and often.

The middle hitter Isenbarger led the Lady Toppers (3-4) in kills last weekend over three matches at the Saint Louis Tournament, posting 26.

Isenbarger will play a prominent role again this weekend as WKU returns home to host the Holiday Inn – University Plaza Invitational.

The Lady Tops will face Chattanooga (11 a.m. Friday), Notre Dame (6 p.m. Friday) and Miami (Ohio) (2:30 p.m. Saturday) over two days at E.A. Diddle Arena.

"Obviously we're trying to get as many wins as possible," Isenbarger told the Daily News on Wednesday. "I'm going to do whatever I can to help our team win."

Isenbarger has played in 23 of 24 possible sets early this season for a WKU squad that's dealt with depth issues.

Senior Taylor Dellinger left the program during preseason practice. Freshman Lauren Matthews, who Hudson said is "maybe the most special talent" he's coached in 24 years with the Lady Toppers, has missed four matches with an elbow injury.

Senior Rachel Anderson (back) and sophomore Kayland Jackson (knee) have played in all seven matches but aren't 100 percent, Hudson said.

Anderson, the Conference USA Preseason Player of the Year, leads WKU in kills (81) and blocks (26).

“It’s not fun,” the middle hitter Anderson said of playing with back issues. “... My goal is to not push myself too hard to where I can’t do anything, but just to go out and do my best.”

With all the injuries affecting the Lady Tops, Hudson has turned to Isenbarger to become a key player just weeks after she arrived at WKU.

Isenbarger ranks third on the Lady Toppers this season in kills (45) and second in blocks (15).

“She’s just not quite ready yet,” Hudson said. “But we’re having to kind of throw her to the wolves.

“Not much rattles her. She gets out there, paints a smile on her face and plays hard. You really can’t ask for much more.”

Hudson signed the 6-foot Isenbarger out of Zionsville (Ind.) High School, where she also played basketball and excelled in the high jump. She tallied more than 1,000 kills in her prep volleyball career and was named an AVCA Under Armour High School All-American.

Isenbarger comes from a family of athletes. Her father, Phil, played basketball at Indiana from 1978-81, winning a national championship his final season. Her brother, Jack, played collegiate basketball at Elon and now plays professionally overseas.

After playing exclusively as a middle hitter in high school, Isenbarger’s had to move around because of WKU’s injuries. That included playing on the right side for the first time in her life, she said.

“I’ve had to play a couple of different roles, some that I’m not used to and where I’m a little uncomfortable,” Isenbarger said. “But it’s been really fun and it’s exciting to learn new positions like that. I’ve been loving it.”



Isenbarger's most efficient match came Friday in a win at Saint Louis. She tallied 10 kills on 17 attacks with no errors, good for a commanding .588 attacking percentage. Isenbarger posted career highs in kills (13) and blocks (four) in a loss to Kansas State.

Anderson said Isenbarger's "insane" athleticism shows when she goes up to block attacks at the net, and that she's also filled a needed offensive role.

"She's been a constant player," Anderson said of Isenbarger. "She shows up every day.

"That's something this team has needed with Lauren out, with me not feeling too great. That really takes a load off our setters and our passers having an extra option out there. She's done great."

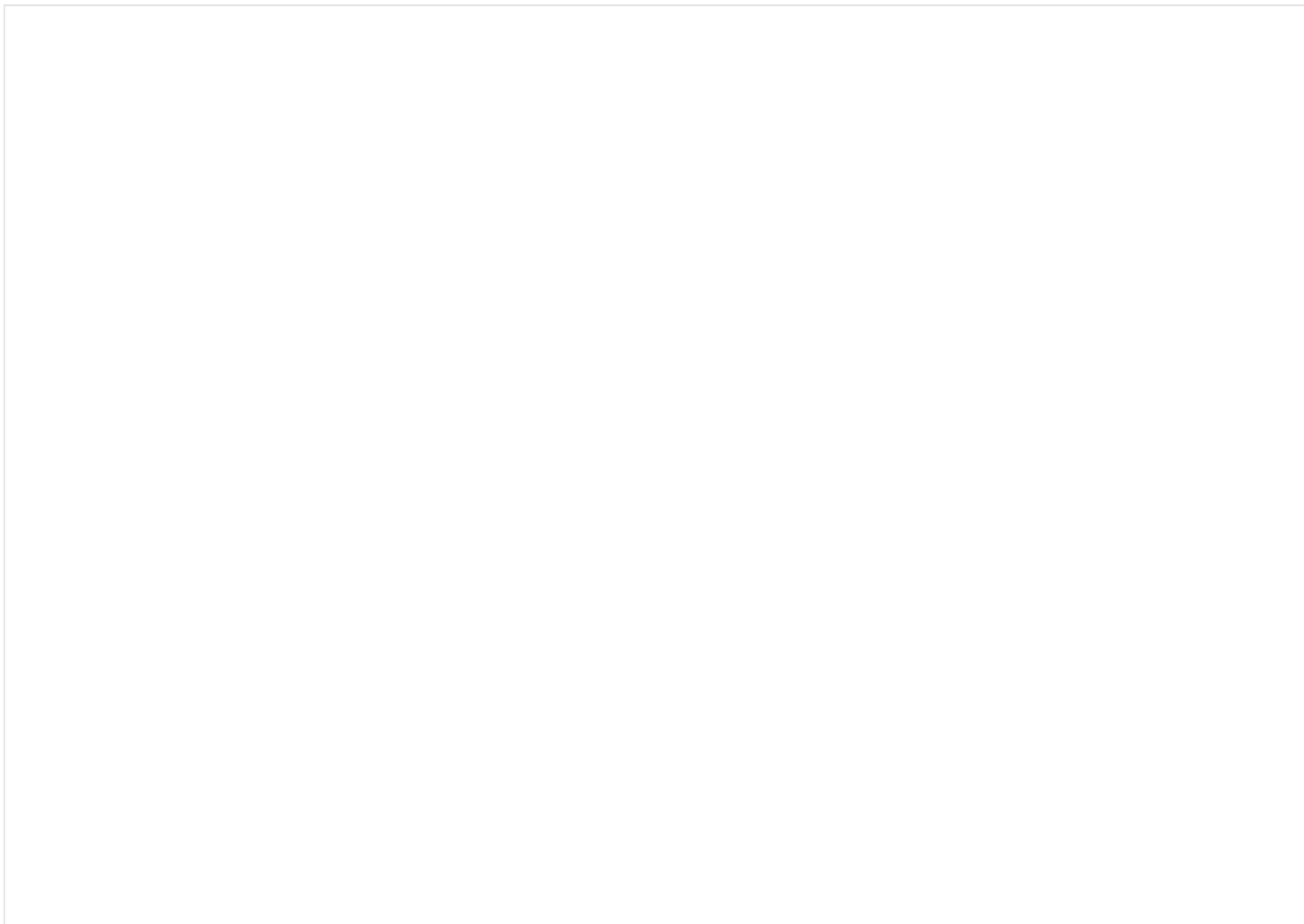
Isenbarger and her teammates will face a difficult field this weekend during the Lady Tops' first of two home tournaments. They'll be back at Diddle Arena on Sept. 14-15 for the WKU Tournament.

This weekend's opponents include two 2017 NCAA Tournament teams in Miami (Ohio) and Notre Dame. WKU swept the Fighting Irish 3-0 in the first round of last year's NAACAs, though Hudson said both teams have experienced roster turnover since that match.

"We put this schedule together with a whole different team in mind," Hudson said. "But it is what it is right now.

"We've just got to continue to grind and keep our head above water until we can get some kids back to full health."

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