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WKU FOOTBALL

Hilltopper RB LaFrance emerges as playmaker

Freshman scored first career TD in loss to Maine

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Western Kentucky running back Garland LaFrance carries the ball Saturday during the Hilltoppers' 31-28 loss to Maine at Houchens-Smith Stadium.

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Down 31-21 to Maine in the fourth quarter Saturday and needing a big play, Western Kentucky went to its speedy new freshman.

Running back Garland LaFrance lined up in the backfield next to quarterback Drew Eckels for a shotgun snap from the Hilltoppers' 25-yard line. After the ball was snapped, the freshman LaFrance took off on a wheel route down the left sideline.

Wide receiver Xavier Lane came off the left side and ran a shallow cross that occupied two defenders, including the linebacker who was supposed to cover LaFrance. Eckels spotted his open running back and quickly got him the ball.

“The play was designed for me to beat the outside linebacker,” LaFrance said Tuesday. “He got picked in front of the receiver, so I was free.”

LaFrance broke a tackle at his own 35, then raced an additional 65 yards down the sideline for a 75-yard touchdown. No Black Bear defender came close to touching him after that initial broken tackle.

“Once Drew recognized it, we knew that play was going to be gone with Garland’s speed,” coach Mike Sanford said.

LaFrance’s long catch-and-run brought WKU to within 31-28 with seven minutes to play. The Toppers got the ball back and had a shot at a game-tying field goal, but it was blocked, and FCS program Maine held on for the three-point win.

WKU (0-2) has lost four straight games dating back to last season and seven of eight. The Hilltoppers will try to stop that skid Saturday at in-state foe Louisville (6:30 p.m., ACC Regional Sports Network).

“It’s small mistakes,” LaFrance said. “We’re not taking it in a bad way. We’re learning from our mistakes and we’re going to bounce back with a win next week.”

LaFrance has emerged as a true positive for WKU despite its winless start to the season.

Through two games, LaFrance has accumulated a team-best 37 rushing yards (4.1 per carry), 103 receiving yards (14.71 per catch) and 54 kick return yards (27 per return).

“Garland clearly is emerging as one of our better playmakers,” Sanford said. “He’s just such a functional player.

“He can catch a ball thrown awkwardly. He’s got the ability to make a cut on a dime, which is a rare ability. And certainly, he’s got that home-run ability as a runner. We all saw that (on his fourth-quarter TD). There was nobody that was even going to get into the conversation with him as he ran down the field.”

The New Orleans native LaFrance committed to both Texas Tech and hometown Tulane at various points during his high school career. He decommitted from both and then chose the Tops over fellow Conference USA program Southern Mississippi shortly before

February's National Signing Day.

LaFrance grabbed teammates' and coaches' attention with his play last month during fall camp. WKU coaches said before camp the race for carries was wide open, and the 5-foot-10, 175-pound back worked his way into that mix.

LaFrance has nine carries, most among the team's running backs, through two games for the Hilltoppers. His seven catches are tied with wide receiver Quin Jernighan for second-most behind only wideout Lucky Jackson's eight.

LaFrance and fellow Louisiana native Dionte Ruffin are WKU's kick return men. Ruffin has returned three kicks early this season, while LaFrance has returned two.

"With this offense, I'm a speed back," LaFrance said. "So they can use me multiple ways – outside, inside. I can do it all, really."

LaFrance is listed as a possible starter at running back Saturday along with four other backs: Gino Appleberry Jr., D'Andre Ferby, Joshua Samuel and Marquez Trigg.

Samuel moved from third to first among the potential starters on this week's depth chart, while LaFrance moved up from fourth to second.





Sanford said Monday that he wants to get the ball in the hands of his running backs more at Louisville than he did against Maine.

WKU officially rushed for 42 yards at 1.4 yards per carry against the Black Bears. But the Topper QB Eckels – who is questionable for Saturday's game with an upper-body injury – was sacked six times for 42 yards, which counts against the team's rushing totals.

Of WKU's 72 offensive plays Saturday, Sanford said only 22 were called runs.

"In called runs, we were just under four yards a carry," Sanford said. "... So I think it's important for us to look back at the run game and realize we need to get more at-bats up front. We can't allow teams to just pin their ears back and rush the passer the whole game."

LaFrance said he and his fellow running backs are embracing the chance for more carries this week.

"It should be good because we have a nice backfield, a talented backfield," LaFrance said. "We've just got to get it together right now. In the future, it's going to be great."

Tight end Mik'Quan Deane expects the speedster LaFrance to continue making plays for the Hilltoppers.

"He's a very explosive, very calm guy," Deane said. "And he likes to learn."

“It’s always good just having one of those speed backs that can come out and do receiver routes. His hips are very fluid in everything he does. He’s very fast and he’s a good kid.”

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