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WKU's instant renewal has been stunning

By JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer 7 hrs ago

The Western Kentucky Hilltoppers head into bowl season on a cloud of optmism that few people outside the WKU locker room could have ever imagined.

Saturday's 31-26 come-from-behind victory over arch-rival Middle Tennessee concluded an improbable regular season that saw WKU go 8-4 overall, 6-2 in Conference USA, and finish with a three-game winning streak, which also included a 45-19 blowout win at Arkansas and, probably even more impressive, a rock-solid 28-10 victory at Southern Miss -- a proud program that rarely loses at home.

All this under the direction of first-year head coach Tyson Helton, who left his post as offensive coordinator at Tennessee to return to WKU, where he served in the same capacity for Jeff Brohm in 2014-15.

From the outset, Helton promised to return the Hilltoppers to their winning ways and re-establish the culture that produced consecutive C-USA championships under Brohm in 2015 and 2016. Whether he figured to do it this first season is open to question, but for fans who said they would consider a 5-7 season a significant improvement, the job Helton and his staff have done has been nothing short of phenomenal.

And, to think, the Helton era began, you might recall, with a quizzical, befuddling, head-scratching 35-28 home loss to FCS Central Arkansas back on Aug. 29. Be patient, Helton calmly and assuredly suggested to Hilltopper Nation in the aftermath; this is not a setback that is going to define the season.

Helton was right -- was he ever right.

Following Western's hard-earned conquest of MTSU, Helton spoke about the team's mindset heading into a yet-to-be-determined bowl game -- an event few Topper fans could have foreseen after last season's 3-9 debacle that sealed the fate of second-year head coach Mike Sanford.

"It carries the momentum for us, and we feel good going into the bowl," Helton said. "It makes practice a lot better -- it just continues the good vibes. Whoever we play will be a quality opponent, but our team is playing good football, so it builds confidence going into our bowl game."

The pivotal player, among many who have made significant contributions for the Hilltoppers, has been Arkansas graduate transfer quarterback Ty Storey. He replaced injured starter Steven Duncan following a 38-21 loss to Louisville on Sept. 14 in Nashville, Tenn., and has since led WKU to seven victories in nine games with uncanny efficiency and surprising versatility.

"It's been one of the more fun years to be a part of," said Storey, who completed 23-of-30 passes for 294 yards and two touchdowns, and rushed for 62 yards and another score against Middle Tennessee. "A lot of it is the guys, the coaching staff, everyone, winning on top of that. It's a feeling I wish everyone could feel -- how close we've come together throughout the year.

"Yeah, we've had some ups and downs and everything, but at the end of the day it's made us all closer and it's made us realize there's something bigger here than individual people -- we've become a real team, and that can take you a long way."

Beyond this, Helton and Co. have quickly proved that the Sanford era -- which produced only nine victories in 25 games -- was merely an aberration, a bump in the road that has in no way derailed one of the most inspiring FBS success stories of a decade that has seen the Hilltoppers become bowl-eligible in eight of the last nine seasons.

WKU is rolling once more.

"We have a different mentality this season," said sophomore defensive end Juwuan Jones, who registered five tackles, including 2.5 for loss and one sack on Saturday. "This year, you can tell on the sideline, we are keeping each other up. We're motivating the offense and the offense is motivating us. I think that's the biggest difference between this year and last year."

T-E-A-M -- Western Kentucky has a good one.

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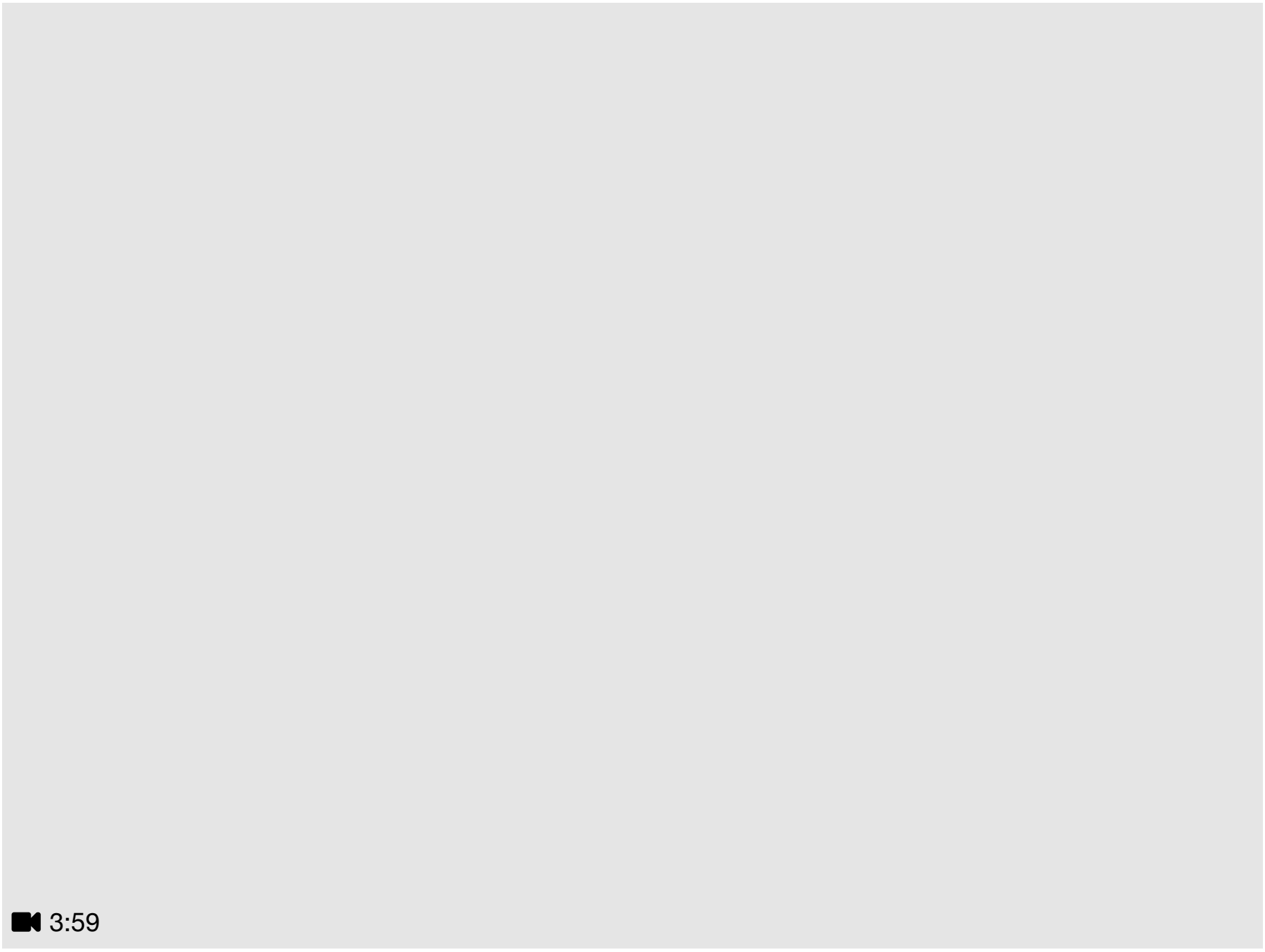
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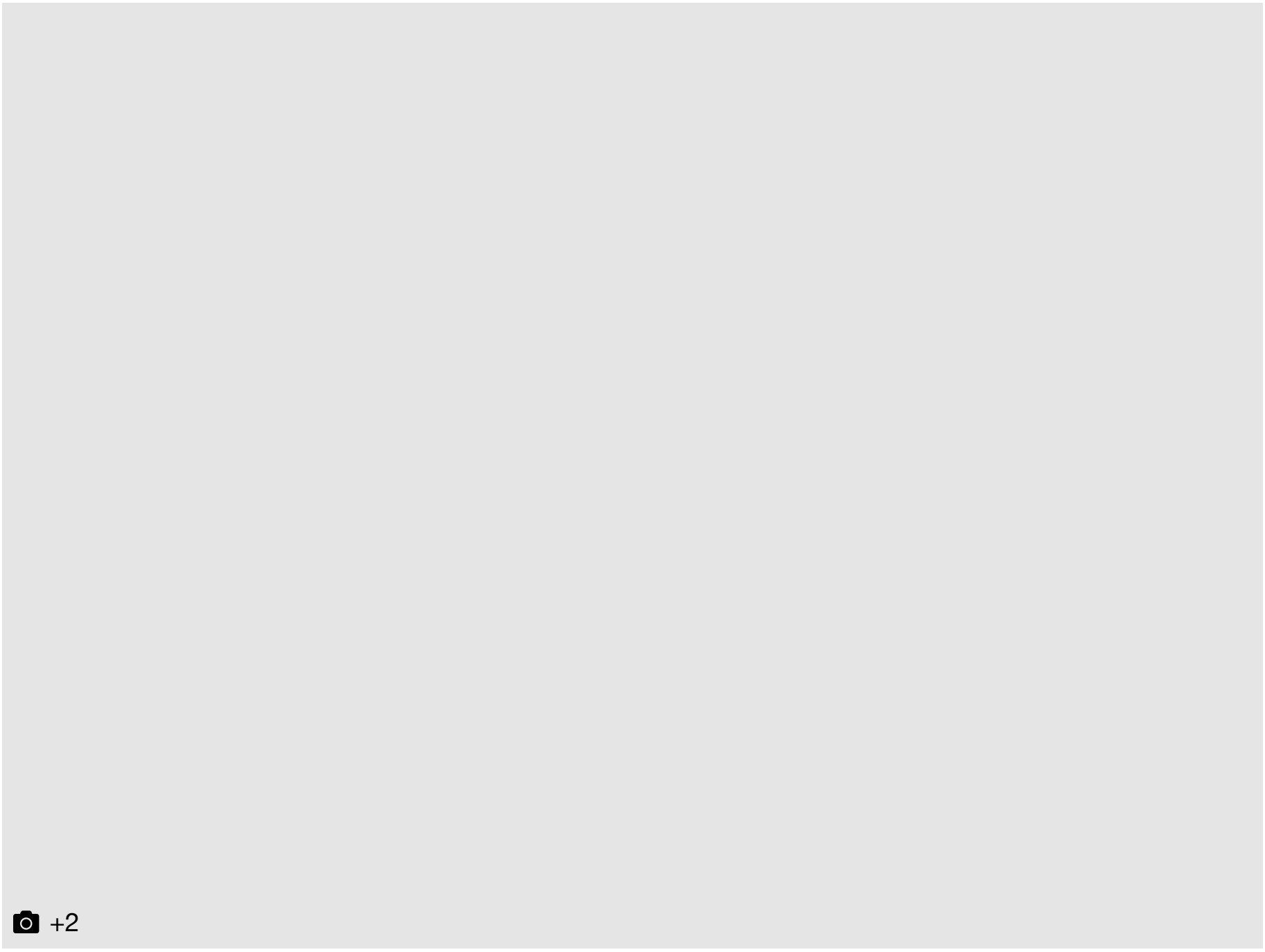
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