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## Hilltoppers try to reboot before stretch run

By JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer Feb 20, 2019 Updated 2 hrs ago

Conference USA's Bonus Play -- a late-season initiative designed to improve or maintain strength of schedule for teams in the league's upper tier -- begins Saturday for Western Kentucky, which travels to league-leading Old Dominion for the first of four games that will close out the regular season.

The Hilltoppers, whose five-game winning streak was snapped in convincing fashion by visiting UAB on Saturday, then visit UAB on Feb. 28, before playing host to Southern Miss on March 3 and upstart Texas-San Antonio on March 6.

Western (16-11, 9-5 C-USA) had played very well in a nine-game stretch that began on Jan. 18 -- winning eight times -- before being humbled in more ways than one by the Blazers (68-60) over the weekend.

The Tops were leg weary against a UAB team that appeared a half-step quicker the whole way.

"We've got to get some guys some rest," said WKU assistant coach Talvis Franklin, who had addressed the team's concerns about depth following the Toppers' 71-63 home victory over rival Middle Tennessee last Thursday. "We've got several guys playing a lot of minutes."

Western's lack of depth typically hasn't reared its ugly head against mediocre foes, but when facing the league's better teams it's become a frightful concern.

Against rebuilding MTSU, for instance, Western reserves were outscored by only 6-5. But a deeper UAB outfit dominated WKU in bench points (23-4) -- getting 13 points and 12 rebounds in a reserve role from former Franklin-Simpson star Tavin Lovan, son of former Hilltopper Tony Lovan.

Beyond this, WKU settled for perimeter shots on a Saturday afternoon when UAB had no one even remotely capable of containing 6-foot-11 freshman center Charles Bassey, who, while making 10-of-13 floor shots to finish with 23 points, 10 rebounds and three blocks, could have come close to doubling those numbers had the Toppers continued to feed him the ball.

Alas, they did not.

Instead, the freewheeling Tops jacked up one ill-advised 3-pointer after another, which played right into the hands of a more focused UAB team that rolled into E.A. Diddle Arena and simply outworked the home team. The Toppers missed 19 of their first 22 shots from distance before sinking 3-of-5 in a futile comeback attempt over the final minute.

"We should've gone to (Bassey) more than we did," said WKU sophomore guard Josh Anderson, as he studied a final stat sheet on Saturday. "We settled again for jumpers, and we can't afford to do that."

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Bassey concurred.

"We needed to drive the ball into the paint more," he said. "We needed to get to the free-throw line more."

Indeed, Western has been at its best when it has pounded the backboards and made more free throws than the the opposition has attempted, but such numbers were turned upside down in the Hilltoppers' recent two-game homestand.

Even in the win over Middle, WKU was badly outrebounded (46-30) and got to the foul stripe only 11 times (MTSU shot 13 free throws). Against UAB, the Toppers were again outrebounded (41-32) and attempted only nine free throws (the Blazers shot 22).

So, is Western simply out of juice? Are the Hilltoppers destined to fail to reach preseason expectations? Or, irony of ironies, can this talented, if inconsistent outfit dig deep and find a way to salvage a rollercoaster season at that critical juncture when everything is on the line?

Intriguing questions regarding an enigmatic team.

And, with only four regular season games and the C-USA Tournament remaining, we're on the cusp of discovering their answers.



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