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TOP STORY

WKU WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Elgedawy still adapting while carrying responsibility for Lady Toppers

Sophomore has started every game of WKU career

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Western Kentucky forward Raneem Elgedawy (left) shoots while guarded by Old Dominion forward Amari Young during WKU's 75-60 win Saturday at E.A. Diddle Arena.

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Raneem Elgedawy has no time or place for a comfort zone.

Culturally or fundamentally, much has been asked of Elgedawy in her second season with the Western Kentucky women's basketball program.

First was an accelerated adjustment to United States basketball and lifestyle. Now it's about learning defense, expanding her offense beyond the paint and leadership off the court.

Halfway through her sophomore season, Elgedawy carries unusual experience for an underclassmen and carries responsibility recently held by veterans. In only her second interview since coming to the United States over a year-and-a-half ago, Elgedawy told the Daily News her sophomore season has been much different.

"This year I'm playing with more confidence," Elgedawy said. "Last year was my first year and everything was different. ... Everyone is looking to me. Kallie (Searcy) and the freshmen are looking up to me. I'm trying to do the best at being their role model."

Elgedawy has started every game of her college career since arriving from Alexandria, Egypt, in the summer of 2017. She's averaged 24.6 minutes in her 50 career starts in the post.

As a freshman, the 6-foot-4 forward brought a new dynamic to WKU's lineup that allowed Ivy Brown to stretch the floor last year. Elgedawy averaged nine points, 7.1 rebounds and 1.2 blocks per game while shooting 47.6 percent from the floor last season, which helped her earn the Conference USA Freshman of the Year award.

Without Brown to fall back on, Elgedawy is the primary focus in the post for the Lady Toppers. With that comes a new demanding discipline on defense and the attention from other teams she's not been used to. Now that Elgedawy has become a commanding presence for other C-USA teams, she's learning better technique and how to keep every other teammate involved.

“The last game they started to double team me and I had to take care of the ball and see who is open,” Elgedawy said. “It’s hard to play like that, but I’m trying to get used to it.”

The sophomore’s offensive production has bumped up to 15 points and 7.5 rebounds per contest through 17 games. She’s improved to a 52.3 percent clip from the field and even attempted three 3-pointers this season. Elgedawy is also six assists away from her total a year ago just halfway through the season, a number that shows she’s picked up double teams to find other open shooters.

“Raneem is quiet, so she doesn’t really say much, but when she’s out there, she knows what she’s doing,” junior Dee Givens said. “She’s gotten way better. She finishes more around the rim and she takes her time when she gets the ball now. Lately, I’ve noticed more teams try to double her in the post, so now she knows how to pivot back and kick the ball back to shooters.”

Elgedawy is most comfortable with her back to the basket, a quick dribble and pivot around defenders for crafty shots. In a similar way that coach Greg Collins worked with Brown in her career to become a post player out of necessity, Collins is now tasking Elgedawy with moving her game away from the basket.

But that’s a tough habit to break after spending a career in Egypt dominating a court with a certain style.

“He wants me to face up more,” Elgedawy said. “Everyone knows now when I catch the ball I dribble and spin, so he wants me to shoot from outside the paint or from the 3. It’s so hard. I didn’t shoot 3s my entire career, so that’s hard.”

Collins said most of Elgedawy’s growth has come on the defensive end, which isn’t exclusive to just Elgedawy on this particular team. Collins has charged WKU with specific focus to defensive intensity in C-USA, which has paid off with a 3-0 start with an average win margin of 21 points. WKU has also held opponents’ best players below their scoring average.

But for Elgedawy and two other international players in redshirt sophomore Arame Niang and freshman Meral Abdelgawad, aggressive defense is quite the learning curve.

“Here, it’s faster,” Elgedawy said. “Everyone is running and everyone is doing different things. I like offense more. I’m trying to (improve) defense, too.”

As far as leadership goes, Collins said Elgedawy is leading others in her efforts to improve defensively.

“She’s really taken a lot more ownership in the defense and that’s where she’s had the most growth,” Collins said. “Right now, (she's) working on that defense so she can stay on the floor for more minutes. She finds herself in foul trouble often and so sometimes we roll the dice and let her stay out there with that extra foul. Sometimes it works and sometimes it’s like we need to protect her and save that foul for the second half. That leadership is more about her work ethic on the defensive end.”

Off the court, a developing relationship with Niang and welcoming Abdelgawad to Bowling Green has helped Elgedawy’s adjustment to life outside of basketball. She knew Abdelgawad from playing club ball against each other in Egypt and said she had a part in influencing the freshman to come to WKU.

In her own right, Abdelgawad has flourished in 17 starts alongside Elgedawy. Abdelgawad has twice been named C-USA Freshman of the Week and averages 10.4 points per game.

“I knew Meral was coming and that made me more excited to come here and be with her,” Elgedawy said. “Now I’m used to playing here and knowing my teammates more. ... Of course, I’m still learning, but I’m having fun, too.”

WKU at FIU

The Lady Toppers begin a Florida road trip against the two worst teams in C-USA. WKU (9-8 overall, 3-0 Conference USA) plays Florida International on Thursday at 10 a.m. and Florida Atlantic on Saturday at 1 p.m.

WKU has defeated FIU (3-14, 0-4) in five straight meetings and FAU (3-14, 0-4) in eight straight contests.

“(We have) to guard the team and not get caught up in playing that record because that’s the mistake you make is looking at the record and say they’re struggling and not playing well,” Collins said. “They’re playing one game and that’s the game we’re playing. They have athletic kids and they play a lot of players. One thing about playing a lot of players is you don’t know who is going to step up, so you have to really be on your toes and be ready.”

Western Kentucky (9-8, 3-0) at Florida International (3-14, 0-4)

10 a.m., Thursday, Miami, Fla.

Probable starters

Western Kentucky – Whitney Creech, g, 5-8, jr. (4.7 ppg, 2.6 rpg); Sherry Porter, g, 5-7, so. (7.0 ppg, 2.2 rpg); Meral Abdelgawad, g, 5-11, fr. (10.4 ppg, 2.9 rpg); Dee Givens, f, 6-1, r-jr. (18.6 ppg, 4.4 rpg); Raneem Elgedawy, f, 6-4, so. (14.9 ppg, 7.9 rpg)

FIU – Chelsea Guimaraes, c, 6-3, r-jr. (10.0 ppg, 4.8 rpg); Kylee O'Hara, f, 6-0, fr. (6.6 ppg, 2.6 rpg); Ce'Nara Skares, f, 6-0, fr. (5.8 ppg, 7.1 rpg); Paula Orenes, g, 5-8, jr. (17.0 ppg, 7.0 rpg); Bre'Osha Scott, g, 5-6, jr. (3.3 ppg, 2.0 rpg)

TV – beIN Sports

Radio ESPN 102.7 FM or 1450 AM

Coaches Greg Collins (9-8 first season), Western Kentucky; Tiara Malcolm (13-45 third season, 13-45 second overall) FIU.

Series WKU leads 29-9 (WKU won the last meeting 101-47 on Jan. 11, 2018 at Diddle Arena)

Last time out

Western Kentucky won 85-55 over Marshall on Jan. 12; FIU lost 95-68 at Old Dominion on Jan. 12.

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