

Can Western Kentucky football and basketball live up to its new, great expectations?

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With Western Kentucky's recent success in men's basketball and the recent hire of Tyson Helton as the head football coach, expectations are high in Bowling Green.

“We’ve achieved a lot, but I feel like our best days lay ahead," Western Kentucky athletic director Todd Stewart said Monday afternoon.

The highest hopes for WKU athletics belong to the basketball program and head coach Rick Stansbury.

The team finished last season 20-14 and just shy of an NCAA Tournament appearance in a season that included three wins against Power Five conference opponents. Its run, along with the return of superstar freshman Charles Bassey, set the stage for WKU to make a run to the tournament this coming season.

“If you go back … to 2016 our program was in a very different place then than it is now across the board," Stewart said. "From a roster standpoint, from a win/loss standpoint and from a fan support standpoint. This past year we had the largest per game attendance average that we’ve ever had since Diddle Arena was renovated in 2003. The year before Rick came here we had the lowest … that alone is a huge achievement."

Earlier: WKU's Tyson Helton on past success: 'We just need to go do it again.' (https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentuckiana/2018/12/18/wku-football-new-coach-tyson-helton-five-questions-interview/2323744002/)

Not only has Stansbury resurrected the crowd at E.A. Diddle Arena, he has also given the Hilltoppers seven wins in two years against Power Five competition. Even the opposition expect great things from WKU, as Stewart claimed that games are harder to schedule because fewer teams are willing to play against Stansbury and his team.

“Those accomplishments have raised the bar of expectations, and that’s good," Stewart said. "We love the challenges that come with winning, expectations are high, and we embrace that. I think the sky’s the limit for this year’s team."

"We expect, and we’ve created the expectation, that no matter who we play, no matter where we play them at, Western Kentucky has a chance to win," added Stansbury "That’s good. Doesn’t mean we’ll win every game, but that’s where those expectations are. As a coach, as a player, that’s what you want.”

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Western Kentucky football was not nearly as successful as the men's basketball program last year, yet expectations are still relatively high for a team that finished 3-9. It all stems from the hiring of Helton as the new head coach.

Helton, the brother of USC head coach Clay Helton, was the offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach for the Hilltoppers when they set dozens of school records and finished fourth in the nation in total offense in 2014.

Helton's hire has the fan base buzzing for a team that could barely fill the stands in their home season finale.

“The vibe around that program today is very good," Stewart said. "The last time Tyson was here the vibe was outstanding. Bringing Tyson back has infused positive energy into every aspect of our program.

"Our players have a bounce in their step they didn’t have before, our fans feel really good about it. We’re thrilled to have him back, he’s hit the ground running and has completely changed the vibe around our program.”

Also: Western Kentucky star Charles Bassey to return for sophomore season (https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/kentuckiana/2019/05/30/charles-bassey-returns-western-kentucky-basketball-for-sophomore-season/1283833001/)

Vibes don't win football games though, and Helton recognized that the team still has work to do to realize the positive energy surrounding them. Helton also said it may take a while for the less experienced guys to lead the team the way he wants them to, but that they have the potential to win a lot of games.

“Players make plays, and I think we got some good young players," he said. "I like this football team, I like the demeanor, I like how we work. I think we do have some pieces there to go make a run, we just got to put it all together.”

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