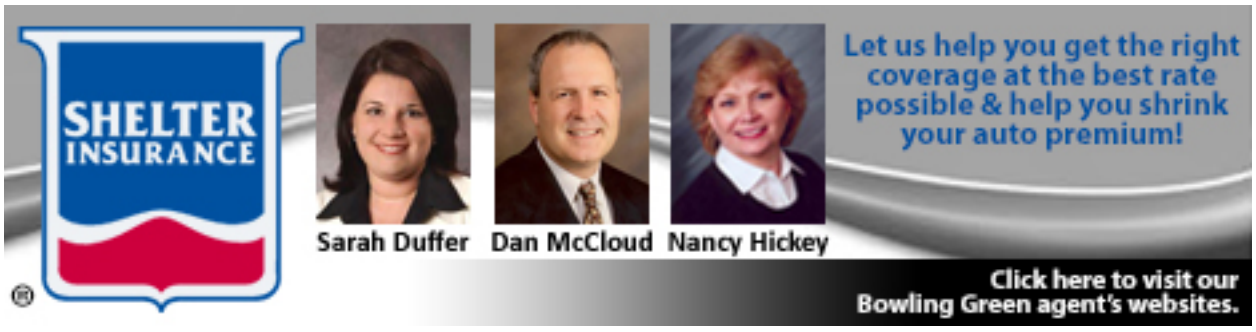





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TOP STORY

WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

# Stansbury: Evaluating facts led to Bassey's return that was 'totally his decision"

## WKU's star center helps raise expectations for 2019-20

ELLIOTT PRATT epratt@bgdailynews.com 1 hr ago

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers head coach Rick Stansbury talks to Western Kentucky Hilltoppers center Charles Bassey (23) during WKU's 67-51 win over North Texas on Thursday, March 14, 2019, at The Star in Frisco, Texas. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

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LOUISVILLE – Rick Stansbury flew to Los Angeles to be with Charles Bassey the day Western Kentucky's star center made the decision.

Bassey was at a professional development workout with other players in front of several teams making last-minute evaluations hours before the early-entry deadline for the NBA draft. The 18-year-old took in every bit of information from pre- and post-combine evaluations to ultimately decide on returning to Bowling Green for his sophomore season.

It's a decision that sets WKU's expectations for 2019-20 even higher. Stansbury spoke for several minutes Tuesday at Big Spring Country Club about Bassey's process and what it means for his future.

"It went right down to the end and totally his decision," Stansbury said at the Lee Robertson-Gary Sundmaker Golf Scramble. "I was there. Probably all 30 teams were at that workout that particular day. He had to go through the workout and at that point, he's got the information. Most of those teams in there were giving him facts he needed to hear. It became real clear to him that evening."

Bassey's return means WKU brings back 81 percent of its scoring, 80 percent of its rebounding and 75 percent of its minutes played from 2018-19. That group mostly consists of Bassey, redshirt senior Jared Savage and rising juniors Taveion Hollingsworth and Josh Anderson.

The Conference USA Freshman of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year led the Hilltoppers with 14.6 points and 10 rebounds last year as a freshman who reclassified. The Lagos, Nigeria, native declared for the NBA draft in April without signing with an agent in order to receive evaluation and retain his college eligibility. He participated in the combine, weighed his options and removed his name at the last minute at the May 29 deadline.

"He had to get all the information," Stansbury said. "That's why it went down to the last minute."

Stansbury's presence in LA was to keep an open line of communication with the 6-foot-11, 245-pound center and offer realities of the situation. The WKU coach said last month he would encourage Bassey to stay in the draft if he felt confident he would be a top-25 pick. No mock draft boards listed Bassey as a first-round selection.

By returning to WKU, Bassey's stock will likely rise for next year's draft, which should theoretically also benefit WKU.

“I think all of us understand we can reap the benefits of it,” Stansbury said. “No question Western Kentucky benefits from having him back. He makes us a better team, but long term it makes him a better player.

“We’re excited to have him back, no question. He made the right decision for himself.”

With that comes the expectation of a bid in the NCAA Tournament or bust. Stansbury spoke of the importance of continuity WKU has with its returners entering his fourth season. The Hilltoppers have come one game short of the NCAA Tournament each of the last two seasons and haven’t played in it since 2013.

Along with Bassey, Hollingsworth, Anderson and Savage, the Hilltoppers return contributors from the bench in Marek Nelson and Tolu Smith. Newcomers are guard Patrick Murphy and forward Carson Williams, who sat out last season due to NCAA transfer rules.

WKU will also add graduate transfer Cameron Justice from IUPUI, and Stansbury is confident Lipscomb transfer Kenny Cooper will be granted a waiver and be eligible by the home opener against Tennessee Tech on Nov. 5.

“This is my first season right here that I’ve had guys back in the program,” Stansbury said. “You don’t get good until you get continuity in your program. For the first time, I like where our program is at there. For the first time, I’ve had an opportunity to look at juniors in recruiting. I’ve never had a chance to do that. For the first time, I really feel like recruiting is catching up and that’s always a good thing.”

Athletics director Todd Stewart also spoke at Tuesday’s alumni event and added Stansbury’s success in selling out Diddle Arena and beating Power 5 opponents have all been good things for the program.

Stewart said with Bassey and company returning, WKU’s best shot at a league crown is now.

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

“Ultimately, if everyone checks their egos at the door and come together as a team, I think this team can achieve things Western Kentucky hasn’t achieved in a long time.”

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