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WKU FOOTBALL

Helton turns WKU back on track in first season

Hilltoppers double win total from last year to become bowl eligible

ELLIOTT PRATT epratt@bgdailynews.com 23 hrs ago



FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – Todd Stewart felt the validation early in his decision to hire Tyson Helton as Western Kentucky's football coach.

The job isn't yet complete, but the body of work Helton has already put together is on pace to put the Hilltoppers back on the path they drastically veered from a year ago.

"I think he's done a phenomenal job," WKU's athletic director told the Daily News after the Hilltoppers whipped Arkansas on the road Saturday. "All through spring and summer and early part of fall practice, I could just sense that everything was a whole lot different about our team in a good way."

By pouncing on the Southeastern Conference's worst team, WKU became bowl eligible for the eighth time in nine seasons. WKU (6-4) had been one game from that threshold for three weeks, but suffered two

losses in the Conference USA East Division that knocked it out of contention for a conference championship game.

That left Helton's Hilltoppers with capitalizing on the November schedule to lock up one of the six C-USA bowl tie-ins. WKU has done that one year after Mike Sanford was fired for a 3-9 season.

Stewart hired Helton to bring those bowl expectations back, and he's done it in one year.

"It's a good feeling," Helton said. " ... I tell the guys what you do in November, they remember. I want them to remember what the Hilltoppers did in November. We're off to a good start."

Because limited bowl tie-ins don't guarantee a team with six wins will earn a bid, WKU must reach a seventh victory to ensure its postseason game. A bye week awaits this Saturday before a road trip to Southern Miss on Nov. 23 and the season finale the next week at home against Middle Tennessee.

After Saturday, the Hilltoppers are one of six teams in C-USA eligible for a bowl. Florida Atlantic leads the East Division with a 7-3 record while the Hilltoppers and Marshall each have six wins. FIU and Charlotte are on the cusp with five wins. On the West Division side, Louisiana Tech is a lock with the league's best overall record at 8-1 with Southern Miss and UAB both sitting at 6-3.

One of the reasons Stewart led the charge for WKU to move into C-USA in 2014 were the bowl tie-ins. As members of the Sun Belt Conference,

WKU reached seven wins in 2011 and eight wins in 2013 and missed out on the postseason because of the league only having two bids.

C-USA has guaranteed commitments with six bowl games and three secondary agreements.

“Six (wins) doesn’t mean you’ve arrived,” Helton said. “For us to get a lock, you have to go win seven. I want to finish out, win eight, go to a bowl game and win nine.”

Stewart said he knew WKU would be back in that conversation even after Helton lost to FCS Central Arkansas in the season opener. A 1-2 start to the year was followed by four straight wins when Ty Storey took over as the starting quarterback.

Then the quarterback piloted WKU’s most dominant performance of the year against the lowly Razorbacks. Omitting that Arkansas is having one of its worst seasons as a program – reports of Chad Morris being fired becoming more credible – Stewart sees Saturday’s 45-19 win in Fayetteville as the best program WKU has defeated.

It was the fourth win against an SEC school, but Arkansas has had more success than Kentucky or Vanderbilt, the other SEC teams the Hilltoppers have beaten since 2012.

“(Central Arkansas) was a disappointing loss for everybody, but I knew the scoreboard didn’t reflect all the progress we made,” Stewart said. “What’s been nice to see is in the nine games since then, the scoreboard is reflecting all the progress we made. I know Arkansas is struggling,

but this is a team that lost by four points this year to Texas A&M. I don't think it's any question it's the best program that Western Kentucky has ever beaten.

"It's not the single best team, but it's the best program. To do it in dominating fashion, it's one of the all-time days for our program."

Notes from WKU's win at Arkansas

WKU improved to 4-21 all-time against opponents currently in the SEC. Dating back to 2012, the Hilltoppers are 4-5 against the conference. ... WKU rushed 47 times for a season-high 265 yards and didn't have any rushes for negative yards. ... Arkansas failed to make a sack for the first time since 2014. ... WKU held Arkansas to its fewest passing yards (87) since 2014. ... Quarterback Ty Storey's 77 rushing yards marked a career high. ... With 177 career receptions, Lucky Jackson passed Willie McNeal (171) for third on WKU's all-time list. His 2,386 career receiving yards also ranks third all-time. ... Gaej Walker's 129 rushing yards gives him six games over 100 yards this year and moves him 88 yards from 1,000 on the season.

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VIDEO: WKU Football Coach Tyson Helton
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VIDEO: WKU's Jahcour Pearson
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