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WKU FOOTBALL

Hilltoppers changing program narrative at season's halfway point

WKU erasing underdog role after winning third straight

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Winning cures all doubts, and plenty of doubts surrounded the program after Western Kentucky's first game under Tyson Helton. The Hilltoppers collapsed in a loss to Central Arkansas, an FCS team paid to visit Bowling Green.

That Thursday night when WKU started 0-1 feels like a distant memory compared to the recent rise in confidence that is changing the program's outlook on 2019.

Doubts are now substituted with plenty of winning.

“In the locker room we’ve always believed and I think our coaches believed in us, too,” WKU quarterback Ty Storey said. “We’re better than what we’ve shown in the past and going out and showing people that was big time.”

WKU has won three in a row after dominating Army on Saturday night in a 17-8 win at Houchens-Smith Stadium. The Hilltoppers (4-2) were in control the entire game and nearly had their first shutout since 2011 until the Black Knights scored a late touchdown.

WKU was the underdog against Army, a team that a year ago was ranked No. 19 nationally and went 11-2. Although each season stands independently, no matter how much merging storylines dictate the narratives of each year, WKU is still climbing away from the identity of a program in shambles.

That may have been the case the last two seasons when former coach Mike Sanford had the program spiraling downward – hence the abrupt coaching change that brought Helton back to WKU. But that reason is why WKU had to play the underdog card in the midseason nonconference game.

That narrative is shifting with WKU surpassing its win total from a year ago and now two victories away from bowl eligibility halfway through the year.

“We’re tired of being the underdog coming into games and tonight was a statement,” WKU defensive back Antwon Kincade said. “We know Army has played good teams like Michigan really well so we wanted to come out there and be the big dog and delete that underdog status.”

WKU showed Saturday it’s creativity on offense can produce enough points to let its defense keep up a top-20 showing. Three games ago against UAB, the Hilltoppers used more designed quarterback runs for Storey to shake up the offense. The next week at Old Dominion they used more quick passes and wide receiver screens.

Saturday against Army was about ball control. Each of WKU’s scoring drives lasted longer than five minutes. It’s scoring drive that made the game 17-0 went 80 yards in 17 plays for nearly 9½ minutes.

The Hilltoppers held possession 17 minutes longer than Army.

“It’s just a culture thing,” WKU offensive lineman Seth Joest said. “Coach Helton doesn’t take his foot off the gas and keeps us working. He’s going to keep grinding us and making us better. It’s working and we’re winning and it’s great to see.”

Meanwhile, the defense nearly had a shutout one week after holding Old Dominion to a field goal. WKU went nine quarters without allowing a touchdown and held Army’s triple-option offense to a season-low 137 yards.

WKU ranks 17th nationally in total defense, allowing 287 yards per game, scoring defense (18.5 ppg), red zone defense (68 percent

conversion rate) and third-down defense (27 percent).

Winning and the numbers suggest the Hilltoppers are changing the outlook on the program entering the second half of the season. A photo from the WKU sideline taken late in the game Saturday showed players with a whiteboard reading, “Underdogs?? Crazy!!”

“We’re not trying to be labeled as the underdog, but we still want to tell the world we’re coming and everything like that,” Kincade said. “Next week is going to be very important for us and we’re ready for it.”

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Hilltoppers beat Army at own game with 17-8 statement win

📹 6:07 VIDEO: Tyson Helton press-conference following 17-8 victory over Army

📹 8:26 VIDEO: Antwon Kincade & Ty Storey press conference following 17-8 victory over Army

📹 3:17 VIDEO: Jaylon George & Seth Joest press conference following 17-8 victory over Army

📹 2:01 VIDEO: Hilltoppers defeat Army 17-8

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