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WKU VOLLEYBALL

Hudson points to rediscovered culture for Lady Toppers' national attention

WKU earns first AVCA top 25 ranking since 2017

ELLIOTT PRATT epratt@bgdailynews.com 14 hrs ago

WKU head coach Travis Hudson talks to his players during WKU's 3-0 win over Southern Miss on Sunday, September 29, 2019, at E.A. Diddle Arena. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

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Austin Anthony

Travis Hudson is typically a big picture coach who doesn't get caught up on accolades that have no bearing on the postseason.

He's making an exception for when it comes to what Western Kentucky's volleyball program has never done in hopes his team sees it validates everything about what they're working toward.

"This is a group that very much deserves the attention they've been getting," Hudson said.

WKU's coach followed up that statement with an open desire that his team be ranked in the top 25 by the American Volleyball Coaches Association. After all, the Lady Toppers are off to the best start in program history with more wins than any other team in the country.

A few hours later, the Lady Toppers' work was honored with a No. 24 ranking in the latest AVCA poll, their first time holding an official top 25 ranking since the 2017 season. WKU has received votes in each of the last 10 seasons and earned a top 25 ranking in eight of the last nine seasons.

WKU earned that mark after sweeping Florida Atlantic and FIU over the weekend to build a 19-1 record, the best start in school history. The only team to beat the Lady Toppers, Louisville, is ranked No. 23.

"I don't think anybody predicts 19-1 when you start a season with the schedule we've played," Hudson said. "I talked back in August about this being a pretty special group of kids that would continue to get better and we've done that. To sit here with the best start in program history and such a young group, that's the most impressive part of this is we're so incredibly young."

WKU's youth had Hudson working harder this offseason than he says he ever has in his 25 years coaching the Lady Toppers, who missed the NCAA Tournament last year after a first-round exit in the Conference USA tournament.

Only two seniors make up a team that's welcomed a transfer setter and a freshman on pace to set record numbers. Senior Sophia Cerino leads the NCAA with 53 service aces, junior Lauren Matthews' hitting percentage of .451 ranks fifth in the nation and transfer setter Nadia Dieudonne ranks seventh in the country in total assists with 753.

Outside hitter Paige Briggs has won three C-USA Freshman of the Week honors and is second on the team in kills (226) and digs (224).

WKU has collected 11 C-USA awards through the first seven weeks and is the only conference school to have a player win an award each week.

"I'm really happy for them to see some of these things happen, but I don't worry that it's going to make them complacent," Hudson said. "Because of how last year went, they see how things happen when you don't do things the right way or don't pay attention to details and don't have a huge buy-in or do all those things."

WKU's 15 straight wins equally gives them a 5-0 mark in C-USA with a road trip to Middle Tennessee approaching Wednesday and a home match against Texas-San Antonio on Sunday.

Fellow C-USA member Rice is ranked No. 19 in the country at 16-1 and will host WKU on Nov. 10 before the C-USA Tournament takes place in

Houston Nov. 22-24.

Hudson has preached buy-in from his players and recognizes a winning streak is harder to sustain in the regular season than the hot hand few teams find in tournament time.

He's aware the balance of success sometimes calls for a bit of adversity now that can benefit the team later in the year when it matters most.

"I'll go to war with this group any day," Hudson said. "They're going to give me everything they have and if we hit a wall, it's just a wall we're going to have to push through, but this group does things the right way. They're having the year they're having not because of the guy on the sideline. They're having the year they're having because they're very intentional about the work ethic they have every day and they're willing to be better.

"That's the challenge. Sometimes when you're winning at the level you're winning right now, it makes you not look as close at yourself as you need to. That's where I come in. They probably think I've been nutty these last couple of weeks, but it's because I know what winning can do to you. I know that it can make you not sweat the details sometimes. That's not where we want to go with this group."

— Follow WKU athletics beat writer Elliott Pratt on Twitter @EPrattBGDN or visit bgdailynews.com.



VIDEO: Travis Hudson on WKU volleyball's best start in program history
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