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WKU FOOTBALL

Helton leans into rivalry significance as WKU preps for Marshall

Toppers hold two-game lead over Marshall in C-USA East

ELLIOTT PRATT epratt@bgdailynews.com 10 hrs ago

There's plenty on the line Saturday when Western Kentucky visits Marshall.

On top of the Hilltoppers being one win away from the six-win threshold of bowl eligibility, Saturday features the top two teams in the Conference USA East Division standings. Heavy implications lie ahead for both teams moving forward.

None of the latter two points should make a difference in motivation factors.

After all, it's Marshall.

“I think playing Marshall is a big enough motivator just in itself,” WKU coach Tyson Helton said at his weekly news conference Monday. “Everyone knows where we’re at. I want them focused on going to play the game and doing a good job.”

The Hilltoppers (5-2 overall, 4-0 Conference USA) and Thundering Herd (4-3, 2-1) have formed quite the rivalry since WKU joined Conference USA in 2014. Marshall leads the all-time series 6-4 and will host WKU in Huntington, W.Va., for the fourth time since the series officially became a rivalry.

Helton was the offensive coordinator when WKU upset Marshall 67-66 in overtime in 2014. The Thundering Herd were undefeated and ranked No. 19 in The Associated Press poll. Brandon Doughty completed a two-point conversion pass to Willie McNeal to win the shootout.

Helton called that game the best he’s ever been associated with, even putting that one over the 2017 Rose Bowl when USC completed a 52-49 comeback win over Penn State. Helton was the quarterbacks coach for that Trojans team.

“That was a heck of a game,” Helton said. “I was really excited to be able to be a part of the Rose Bowl and beat Penn State, but my favorite game of all time is at Marshall. Just two good football teams going back-and-forth and whoever had the ball last was going to win and to go for it with a two-point conversion there late is great.

“You never know how a game is going to change up or how each side is going to break. You’ve got to try to rekindle that magic like we did last time.”

WKU won the first three meetings and hasn’t won since a 60-6 drubbing of the Herd in Huntington in 2016, the worst home loss ever for Marshall.

The Thundering Herd escaped Houchens-Smith Stadium with a 20-17 win last season when WKU quarterback Steven Duncan fumbled inside the Marshall 10-yard line.

Helton isn’t using anything from the past or current stakes to motivate his team’s goal of earning a fifth-straight victory and taking full control of the C-USA East Division. The Hilltoppers currently have a two-game lead over Marshall, which has the tiebreaker over FAU in the division after a 36-31 win over the Owls last week.

A win would also put the Hilltoppers in bowl contention and double their win total from 2018.

“It’s not something I talk about with the team,” Helton said. “It’s a one game at a time mentality. I want to be more than just bowl eligible. Let’s go win a conference championship. That’s the name of the game. Everything else falls in place and that’s what happens naturally.

“Would I be very happy to be bowl eligible? There’s no question about it. I just want to go and play Marshall, get a win at Marshall and keep on going.”

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Elliott Pratt

Covering the Western Kentucky University athletics beat for the Bowling Green Daily News.