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Hilltoppers in position for strong finish

BY JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
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Surprising even their most die-hard supporters, the Hilltoppers of Western Kentucky have battled through an adversity-filled basketball season to emerge as a contender for the Conference USA championship.

Despite the loss of 6-foot-11 All-American candidate Charles Bassey on Dec. 7 to a season-ending leg injury, despite the NCAA denying a waiver for immediate eligibility to Lipscomb transfer guard Kenny Cooper, despite a recurring back ailment that has cost graduate guard Camron Justice significant playing time, and despite an ultra-thin bench WKU is right there — poised to take a crack at the title.

Western head coach Rick Stansbury and his staff deserve plenty of kudos for keeping WKU in contention during a season that has featured circumstances that would derail most programs.

The Hilltopper players, of course, deserve the most credit.

“These guys just grind, and they deserve a lot of credit — they’ve had to fight through a lot,” Stansbury has said. “What we’ve been through has pulled this group closer together, and our players understand that it takes all of us being at our very best in order to have success.

“It’s been a real challenge, but our guys have responded to the challenge the right way.”

Last week’s sweep through Texas of UTEP and UTSA pushed WKU to 18-8 overall and 11-3 within the league — just a game behind front-running North Texas, a team the Hilltoppers defeated 93-84 in the conference opener on Jan. 2 in E.A. Diddle Arena.

The Toppers qualify as hot, having won four games in a row and nine of their last 11.

“We just need to keep taking it one game at a time, that’s all you can really do,” said 6-foot-5 senior swingman Jared Savage, who willed WKU past UTSA 77-73 in overtime on Saturday in San Antonio, producing 24 points and 16 rebounds to earn C-USA Player of the Week honors. “We have to stay focused, stay together — that’s what it’s going to take to keep winning.”

The best news of all, however, is that Western’s weary warriors have a full week between their most recent game and their next one — and rest will likely be at the top of the agenda.

On Sunday, C-USA announced its “bonus play” schedule — designed to enhance schedule strength for the upper-tier teams — for the final four games of the regular season. The Tops play their first two games at home — Saturday against Charlotte and the following Thursday (Feb. 27) versus Louisiana Tech (CBS Sports Network). Then, WKU hits the road for its final two — March 1 at North Texas (CBS Sports Network) and Feb. 7 at FIU.

A lot is at stake the rest of the way, including the program’s first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2013 — which will require the Hilltoppers to win the C-USA Tournament in Frisco, Texas.

Beyond this, WKU has an opportunity to capture its 43rd conference championship (only Kentucky and Kansas have won more) and win 20 games in a season for the 46th time (seventh-best all time).

After Bassey was lost for the season, prospects looked bleak for any of this being a possibility — but the Hilltoppers have persevered with passion.

“These guys continue to battle, my goodness, they battle,” Stansbury said of his undermanned, undersized club. “Every time out, they give it all they’ve got, and that’s all you can ask for.”

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