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WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

Through identity shift, Hilltoppers still the team to beat in C-USA

WKU tied for first in C-USA; Toppers not slowing down since Bassey

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Western Kentucky Hilltoppers guard Jordan Rawls (3) drives to the lane during WKU's 91
Saturday, January 25, 2020, at E. A. Diddle Arena. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.c

Austin Anthony

Western Kentucky was picked as the preseason favorite to win Conference USA. It's returning talent included one of the top professional prospects in the league in center Charles Bassey.

When the team went through a tough December with Bassey's season-ending injury and the news that senior point guard Kenny Cooper wouldn't be eligible to play, it was easy to think the next step for the Hilltoppers would be backwards.

Except, it's been anything but that.

"When CB went down, everyone else in Conference USA started smiling," senior guard Camron Justice said. "But there was not one person in that locker room that knew we were going to take a dropoff."

What the Hilltoppers have done instead is found ways to win in the midst of that adjustment. Even without the 6-foot-11 Bassey standing guard on defense or serving as an automatic bucket in the paint on offense, WKU is making up for that absence and winning in the process.

The Hilltoppers (14-6, 7-1 Conference USA) have won five straight and have a share of first-place in the C-USA standings. They hold a tie-breaker over North Texas, the team they defeated in the first league matchup of the season to start the hot streak they're riding.

Six games remain on the conference schedule before the four games of bonus play are announced to set the seeding for the C-USA Tournament in March.

“We have a lot of heart,” freshman Jordan Rawls said. “We don’t plan on losing no more games. We’re going to keep fighting and try to prove a lot of people who doubted us wrong.”

WKU’s new identity meant finding ways to make up for Bassey’s 15.3 points and 9.2 rebounds he had in 10 games. That included moving 6-5 forward Carson Williams into the post to replace Bassey and adding 6-6 guard Josh Anderson into the starting lineup rather than using him as a spark off the bench.

It’s also included – though not by preferred design – the freshman Rawls starting at point guard while Justice was sidelined briefly with a back injury. WKU has also found younger players like freshman Isaiah Cozart and redshirt freshman Jeremiah Gambrell to offer valuable minutes of relief.

The most noticeable change in the Hilltoppers’ run, whether or not it has to do with Bassey’s exit, is Taveion Hollingsworth regaining his natural scoring role as a shooting guard.

“We found our new identity and I think we’re doing it right now,” Justice said.

The biggest question coach Rick Stansbury had to address during the change was defensively without the rim protection Bassey brought.

After all, the sophomore was the reigning C-USA Defensive Player of the Year and had 16 blocks through 10 games before the injury.

Forward/guard Jared Savage has 12 blocks and Anderson has 10 swats in conference games, helping the Hilltoppers rank third in the league with 3.9 blocks per game.

WKU is currently sixth in the league allowing 68.8 points per game through eight conference matchups.

The most noticeable way WKU has adjusted defensively is a consistent switching between man and zone defenses, frequently using a full-court press.

“Naturally you’re always happy figuring out things and getting Ws when you do it,” Stansbury said. “It’s going to be a figure-out with this team every game we play. Different styles, different matchups, different people. We’ll continue to adjust.”

Williams has taken on more responsibility in the center position, but still stretches away from the basket as the matchup calls for it. He’s averaging 14.8 points and 7.1 rebounds per game in conference play and also has 14 assists through eight games.

“You see us continue to tweak offensively with different people,” Stansbury said. “Bigger guys are going to pull Carson away from that basket. We didn’t post him one time (Saturday). Some other games maybe the post guy isn’t as big and we try to get him around that block a bit.”

The guard rotation between Rawls and Hollingsworth has also helped produce solid offense. Rawls became the starter on Jan. 9 when Justice left the lineup with a back injury. That night at UAB has been WKU's only loss in conference, but Rawls taking over the point allowed Hollingsworth to start scoring at will. The Lexington native is averaging 21.3 points per game since that move, well above his season average 15.3 points per game.

Now Justice has been coming off the bench the last three games for valuable minutes that Stansbury says has been the biggest difference. Justice had 11 points against Marshall on Saturday for his first double-digit scoring game since playing Rice on Jan. 4.

"It's a constant adjusting," Stansbury said. "We've got some guys, the more they play and the roles we play, the better we're getting. The thing we're consistent at is attacking that rim off that bounce. Taveion gets to that foul line a bunch and (Savage) can jump up and make shots. Having Cam Justice back gives us a lot more versatility, too."

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SLIDE SHOW: WKU defeats Marshall 91-84
Jan 25, 2020



VIDEO: Hilltoppers show off balance to sweep Marshall
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VIDEO: WKU Men's Basketball Coach Rick Stansbury
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VIDEO: WKU's Jordan Rawls and Camron Justice
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