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# Tops have become the little engine that could

BY JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
Jan 28, 2020

Two weeks ago, a few days before Old Dominion would venture to Western Kentucky for a Conference USA basketball game, Monarchs coach Jeff Jones was asked about the Hilltoppers — post- Charles Bassey.

“It would be a blow to any team to lose a player the caliber of Bassey,” Jones said, in reference to WKU’s 6-foot-11 center who suffered a season-ending leg injury on

Dec. 7. “But Western Kentucky still has a lot of talent, and they’re still a very dangerous team in our league.”

Jones, the former Apollo High School star from the late 1970s, has proved prophetic, to this point.

Last week’s riveting away-and-home sweep of Marshall pushed the Hilltoppers to 14-6 overall and 7-1 in C-USA — numbers few would have dared to predict after Bassey went down in WKU’s dramatic overtime conquest of then-undefeated Arkansas.

Undermanned. Undersized. Undeterred.

“We are what we are, and it takes everyone contributing for us to be successful,” said 6-5 junior Carson Williams, WKU’s de facto pivot man since the injury to Bassey, “but things are coming together, players are more comfortable in their roles now, and I think that’s reflected in the way we’re playing.”

Indeed, Western has won seven of its last eight games and will take a five-game winning streak into Thursday’s league matchup with Florida Atlantic in Boca Raton.

The Toppers’ all-for-one, one-for-all mindset showed up on the stat sheet following Saturday’s 91-84 victory over Marshall, with WKU shooting 51% from the field, including 44% from 3-point range, and making 77% from the foul line.

Entering the game, WKU ranked sixth nationally in free-throw shooting (78.5%), eighth in fewest fouls per game (13.4), 37th in total blocked shots (87) and 64th in scoring offense (76.5 ppg).

Moreover, six Hilltoppers — led by junior guard Taveion Hollingsworth’s 18 points — reached the double-figure scoring column against the visiting Herd.

“We have a lot of players on this team who can score the basketball,” graduate guard Camron Justice said early in the season. “I think we’re going to be balanced all season, and that’s one of the things that’s going to make our team tough to defend.”




And, quite ironically, WKU has become much harder to guard since Bassey's injury. After all, the opposition pretty much knew the Hilltoppers' game plan with Bassey on the court — get the ball to the big fella — but the Toppers were maddeningly inconsistent in their ability to deliver the ball to the paint. Consequently, the offense often sputtered.

These days, Western strikes from numerous angles, has picked up the pace considerably, and has sharpened the saw with regard to its half-court defensive pressure. With no starter over 6-6 — and just three over 6-4 — rebounding remains a daunting challenge, but, thus far, it has not proved to be a season-wrecker.

"We're on a razor's edge," WKU coach Rick Stansbury has cautioned repeatedly since Bassey's injury. "Our margin for error is very thin."

True this, but the Hilltoppers have risen to the occasion time and again throughout January — overcoming long odds to remain a contender for the Conference USA championship. In the process, they've become the little

engine that could.

What February and March hold for this curious contingent remains to be seen, but Stansbury does know this — he's going to get everything they have.

"This team plays with a lot of heart," the WKU coach said. "A *lot* of heart."




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