

TOP STORY

WKU MEN'S BASKETBALL

Bassey: 'I just can't wait to start playing again'

WKU star center ready to get back to action after season-ending injury

By JARED MacDONALD jmacdonald@bgdailynews.com

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Above: Western Kentucky center Charles Bassey jogs onto the court Nov. 9, 2019, after being announced before WKU's 97-75 win over Austin Peay at E. A. Diddle Arena. **Below:** Bassey dunks Dec. 7 during WKU's 86-79 overtime win against Arkansas at E. A. Diddle Arena.

Daily news file photos


When Western Kentucky takes the floor Nov. 25 in the Golden Window Classic in Lincoln, Neb., against an opponent still to be announced, it'll mark the first time Charles Bassey has played in a game in nearly a year.

With two weeks to go until that day, the Hilltoppers' star center is itching to get back out there.



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“I can’t wait, man,” Basseyy said Tuesday during the team’s Zoom media day. “I know it’s been a minute, it’s been since last year in December. It’s been almost a year. I know when I get out there, I’m going to do my job, I’m going to do what I’m supposed to do because that’s all I’ve been doing – studying with my rehab and right now scrimmaging against my teammates – I know I’m going to be ready.

“I just can’t wait to start playing again. It’s going to be fun.”

When the 6-foot-11, 235-pound Lagos, Nigeria, native takes the floor, it’ll be his first time in a game since being assisted off the court at E.A. Diddle Arena with 3:40 remaining in the second half of a Dec. 7 overtime victory over Arkansas. Basseyy attempted to grab a loose ball when he went down hard holding his left leg in pain, and it was later announced he would miss the rest of the season with a tibial plateau fracture that would require surgery.



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Bassey had the surgery three days later in Houston. It was performed by physicians for the NFL's Houston Texans and the NBA's Houston Rockets, and following the procedure the WKU men's basketball Twitter account updated fans on the center's status, writing it was "very positive and exceeded expectations," adding that the bone was successfully repaired and Bassey was expected to make a full recovery within nine months.

Then came the recovery.

The junior worked with associate athletic trainer John Erwin while the Hilltoppers continued on their 20-10 season, including a workout along the sidelines at The Star in Frisco, Texas, on March 10 as the team prepared to open the Conference USA Tournament later that week. The tournament was later canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and players went their separate ways after arriving back in Bowling Green.

Bassey stayed and continued his rehab, however, and was cleared for noncontact rehab court activities at the beginning of June and took part in voluntary workouts when the team returned to campus that month.



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“Just doing the stuff all over again, doing the same rehab, you’ve just got to stay consistent with it. Just waking up the next morning doing the same thing from Monday to Friday and just spending enough hours in the training room with our athletic trainer and the strength and conditioning coach,” Bassey said. “Just doing that stuff every time, it’s all mental, and with the injury, too.”

“My family got me through it, my teammates and everybody was there for me. I can’t thank them enough and I’m glad I have those people around me.”

Bassey said he would sometimes spend from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the training room to make sure his return would go smoothly.

“Just making sure I’m 100% healthy when I come back and start playing again,” Bassey said. “When I got back playing, I felt I was ready, I was good to go. Just stuff like that, doing the same thing every day with the same mentality and just putting a lot of hours into stuff just helped me.”

During the summer, WKU coach Rick Stansbury said he was impressed with Bassey's recovery and that he was "sprinting really well," but that "he's still trying to get that muscle back developed where it was at before in that leg." He also said he expected Bassey to be fully cleared by the time full practices started.

The work he's put in has been noticed by his teammates, too.

"Charles looks really good. Props to him. He put in the time," redshirt senior guard Kenny Cooper said. "Everybody was gone and he stayed here and put in the time and effort that was needed for him to get back and be ready for the season, and now he's ready, he looks good and I'm excited for him."

"Since (the injury), Charles has progressed very well," redshirt senior forward Carson Williams said. "You wouldn't know that there had been any issue, any injury by watching him at this point. We're excited to see what he's going to do."

On Sept. 10, WKU announced Bassey was cleared and back on the court for full-contact activities. The announcement included a photo of him dunking with Cooper and Jordan Rawls watching from close to the basket.

“It’s been good, for sure,” senior guard Josh Anderson said. “Charles is excited to come back, finally get back on the court. He’s been showing how much he missed the game and how much he loves playing and it’s just been good to finally get back out there and play with him.”

Bassey has been the team’s biggest professional prospect in recent years, and participated in the NBA scouting combine the spring following his freshman season. He withdrew his name from consideration late and opted instead to return to WKU for his sophomore season.

He was the Conference USA Freshman and Defensive Player of the Year his first year at WKU after averaging 14.6 points and 10 rebounds per game as a reclassified freshman. Through 10 games as a sophomore, he led the Hilltoppers with 15.3 points and 9.2 rebounds with 16 blocks and eight steals.

Expectations are in place again this year for Bassey. Last week, he was named to the C-USA Preseason All-Conference Team along with senior guard Taveion Hollingsworth. Bassey was also named a Preseason Second-Team All-American this year by Lindy’s, and enters the season as the nation’s active leader in career rebounding average at 9.8 per game and is ninth on WKU’s career blocks list with 97.

“We’ve been watching him rehab since he got injured,” WKU senior guard Taveion Hollingsworth said. “Just seeing him go down was tough on us. We definitely could have used him in a lot of games last year, but he’s been working really hard on that leg and in

practice he's showing he looks really good right now. He's going to shock a lot of people."

Exactly two months after being cleared for full activities, Bassey spoke about his injury with the media for the first time, and made it clear he's ready to be back playing in games again.

"With the injury, that was devastating, but I'm back now. I'm good to go," Bassey said. "I've been practicing, I've been scrimmaging with my teammates since September, so I'm going to be ready for the season."&end}

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Jared MacDonald

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