https://www.messenger-inquirer.com/sports/bassey-key-to-national-limelight-for-wku/article_79462638-95eb-5cb8-b62d-67b49fbcf7bd.html

Bassey key to national limelight for WKU

BY JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
Nov 14, 2020

Rick Stansbury is about to begin his fifth season as head coach of the Western Kentucky men's basketball program, and it's easy to overlook how successful he's been in light of the fact that he is yet to lead the Hilltoppers to the NCAA Tournament.

With All-American candidate Charles Bassey back at WKU for his junior season in 2020-21, however, the Hilltoppers have a golden opportunity to wipe away the memories of missed NCAA Tournament opportunities of the past — if, of course, the escalating COVID-19 pandemic can be navigated from late November through March Madness.

This is a big "if" to be sure, but the combination of Bassey's return and the best (and deepest) all-around roster of Stansbury's tenure at WKU makes for some grand possibilities.

Last season, for instance, Western went 20-10 overall, was 13-5 in Conference USA, held serve in a huge way inside E.A. Diddle Arena (12-2), and was primed for a strong run at the C-USA Tournament championship when the coronavirus reared its ugly head in mid-March and wiped out the collegiate postseason.

It's interesting to note that Bassey — a 6-foot-11 center — played in only one-third of those games, before suffering a tibial plateau fracture in his left leg in Western's 86-79 overtime conquest of visiting Arkansas on Dec. 7. The Hilltoppers managed to go 13-7 without him, and the fact that WKU didn't fall completely apart over the last 20 games is noteworthy.

This time around, Bassey will be surrounded by some familiar faces and some newcomers who appear primed to make immediate and significant contributions.

Senior guard Taveion Hollingsworth, climbing the school's all-time scoring list seemingly every game, is back, as is senior forward Josh Anderson, the 6-6 high-rise dunker who has become a fixture on ESPN's "Top 10 Plays" segment the last three seasons. Carson Williams, a bullish, surprisingly athletic 6-6 senior power forward, also is back to supply ample glue.

These four battle-tested players represent the core of an experienced team that is hungry to take the Hilltoppers to the next level of success in college basketball.

Also back are 6-1 sophomore combo guard Jordan Rawls, who had some big moments after being thrown into the proverbial fire as a true freshman, and senior Kenny Cooper, the talented 6-foot point guard transfer from Lipscomb, who sat at the end of the WKU bench but never received the green light of eligibility from the NCAA last season.

But there's more — plenty more.

Add to the list 6-7 sophomore power forward Isaiah Cozart, 6-4 freshman guard Kylen Milton, 6-6 junior forward Kevin Osawe, 6-5 freshman guard Luke Frampton, 6-7 freshman forward Conrad Bailey, and 6-1 freshman guard Dayvion McKnight, the 2020 Kentucky Mr. Basketball recipient out of Collins High School.

But the key to WKU making national noise is Bassey, whose ability to set the tone at both ends of the court will prove invaluable should he return to any semblance of his previous form.

How good can the Hilltoppers be?

Very good?

Great?

Excellent?

Superior?

Every answer is in play as long as Charles Bassey is on the floor and the college basketball season is, in fact, played.

Grand possibilities, indeed.

---

jpickens