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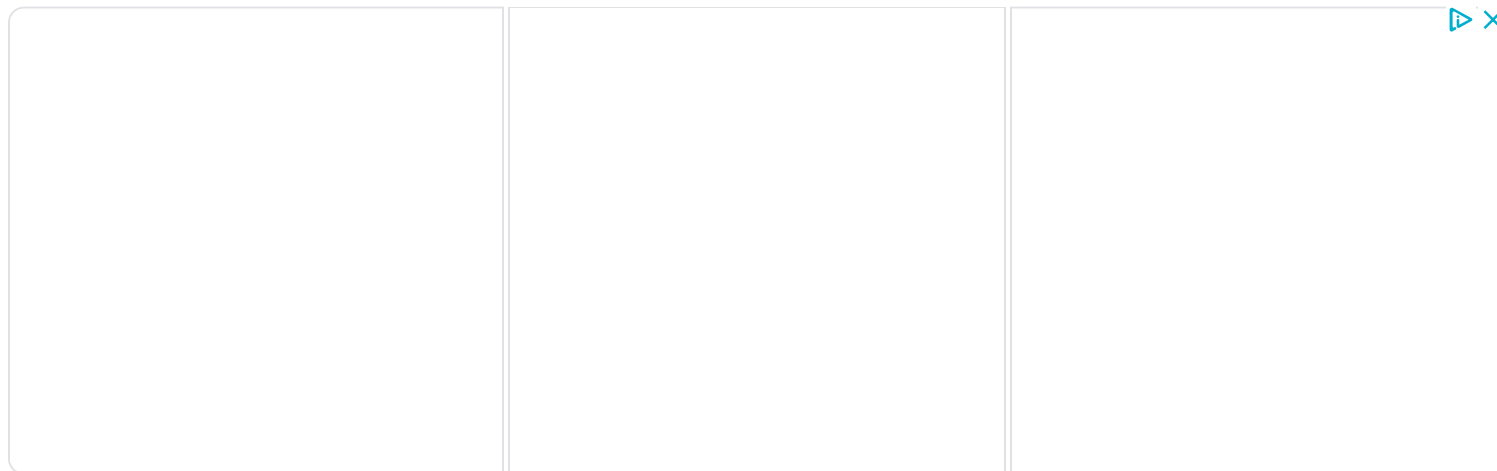
OUR OPINION

WKU volleyball program reaches new heights

Apr 23, 2021

In the most challenging of his 26 seasons as Western Kentucky’s volleyball coach, Travis Hudson still managed to “put another brick on that house that’s being built,” despite the program’s already incredible list of accomplishments during his tenure.

While navigating the challenges of playing a season during a pandemic, the Lady Toppers finished with their best-ever winning percentage and deepest run in the NCAA Tournament.



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WKU finished with a 23-1 record for a .958 winning percentage. The Lady Toppers completed their first-ever undefeated regular season and went on to claim their sixth Conference USA title in seven seasons since joining the league.

And that was just the start.

WKU swept Jackson State in the first round of the NCAA Tournament before turning its attention to a Washington State team that was seeded 15th in the tournament and ranked one place higher than the Lady Toppers in the latest American Volleyball Coaches Association poll. The Lady Toppers claimed the first two sets before holding on for a 3-2 victory to send the program to its first-ever Sweet 16.

That match was the first five-setter the Lady Toppers even had to play this season because they were so dominant. Until that point, WKU had a 66-4 advantage in sets won through 22 matches. They succeeded both offensively and defensively and were the only team to rank in the top 10 in both hitting percentage and opponent hitting percentage entering a Sweet 16 matchup with Kentucky, which WKU ultimately lost.



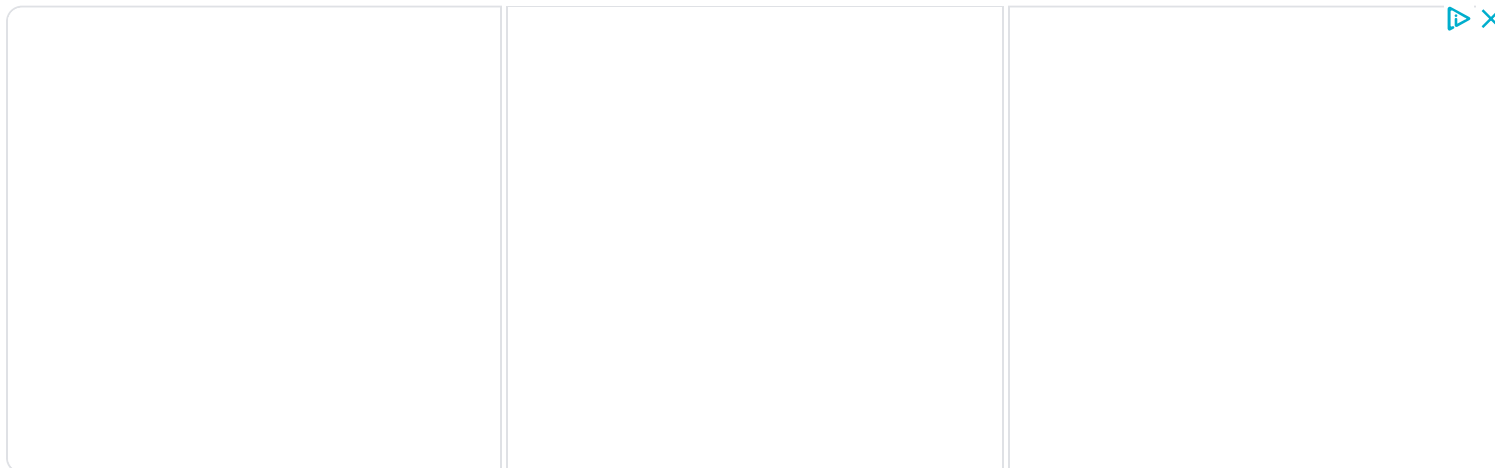
Several players received well-deserved accolades during the season as well.

Paige Briggs, Nadia Dieudonne and Lauren Matthews were first team all-conference selections, and Katie Isenbarger was a second team choice. Somehow, no WKU players received individual superlatives from the league. But it helped fuel the team to the title, as if the Lady Toppers needed any more motivation.

The four were later named AVCA South All Region First Team members, and Kayland Jackson was an honorable mention choice. Briggs was tabbed as the region's Player of the Year, and Hudson earned his seventh Region Coach of the Year award.

Matthews on Wednesday was named an AVCA Second Team All-American – the highest individual honor the program has received. Briggs and Dieudonne were AVCA Honorable Mention All-Americans.

The Lady Toppers represented the university and community off the court as well, as shown with Dieudonne's Senior CLASS Award First Team All-American selection. The award, chosen by a nationwide vote of Division I women's volleyball coaches, national volleyball media and fans, is given annually to the most outstanding senior student-athlete in Division I women's volleyball. She was one of five players in the country to earn first team status.



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More meaningful, however, is that they did all of this in honor of the most decorated player in program history. Alyssa Cavanaugh died at age 24 on Christmas Day after fighting acute lymphoblastic leukemia. WKU wore “AC” patches in honor of her, not to remember her, because, “If you honor Alyssa, then you play the game in a certain way – you play it with joy and you play it with competitiveness – and I wanted our players to represent that, and to me that honors her legacy more than just remembering who she was,” Hudson said after the team’s first match of the spring.

There is no doubt Hudson, his staff and players honored Cavanaugh this spring.

And so concludes another WKU volleyball season to be celebrated. The program continues to rise to new heights, and with a full roster returning for the fall, hopes are high for another brick to be laid in the house being built.

Congratulations to the Lady Toppers for another tremendous season and for your “fairy-tale ride” to the Sweet 16 the WKU fan base and community were able to join you on.

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