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TOP STORY

WKU football

Portal to success: WKU's approach to building team pays off

Hilltoppers' transfers lead team to C-USA championship game

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Western Kentucky quarterback Bailey Zappe looks to pass during the Toj Smith Stadium.

Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com

Two days before the early signing period for the 2021 class, Tyson Helton wasn't nervous about his approach to recruiting entering his third season as Western Kentucky's head football coach.

"We feel good about it," Helton said then. "I think we're on a good path right now."

It turns out that path – which featured a large portion of the incoming class arriving via the transfer portal – would take the Hilltoppers to the Conference USA championship game, where they will face off against the University of Texas at San Antonio at 6 p.m. Friday at the Alamodome in San Antonio.

"I'm really happy with the men that are on our team and, again, it goes back to our staff and it starts with people first. You select good men that have a passion for winning that will love the process," Helton said Saturday after the team's 53-21 victory at Marshall. "That's the one thing I thought about the transfer portal, especially during the COVID year – we were able to get good men on the roster that were able to help us immediately when we couldn't go out and recruit.

"We were able to check all the boxes and the good lord was looking after us. I thought the pieces of the puzzle were there with the pieces that were already here and then we added the guys that came in and it's just been a match made in heaven. It was a good move by our staff for sure."

WKU finished off an 8-4 regular season with Saturday's win over the Thundering Herd, and with wins in its final seven games, it finished atop C-USA's East Division. A large part of that success was because of transfers from other colleges.

Of the 105 players on WKU's 2021 roster entering the season, 26 (24.8%) were incoming transfers. Of those, 14 came directly from FBS programs, and 10 of those were from Power Five programs.

The most notable transfers, however, came from the FCS ranks.

There were eight players who came from FCS programs, including four that followed Zach Kittley from Houston Baptist when he left the Huskies to become WKU's new offensive coordinator.

"Speaking on the transfer portal thing, clearly we did a really, really good job here and we've had a tremendous asset from those guys that are on this football team this year," Kittley said. "I kind of think, for us, it was kind of a learning process, too. This was the first year it happened, so we were one of the programs in the country that really embraced it and it paid off for us. I definitely think you're going to see a lot more teams take that approach depending where you're at, what your personnel is clearly, and what you need."

The most productive of the four HBU transfers were Bailey Zappe and Jerreth Sterns, and the Hilltoppers have also seen bright spots from Josh Sterns and Ben Ratzlaff throughout the season.

Zappe has thrown for 4,968 yards and 52 touchdowns on 406-of-581 (69.9%) passing with nine interceptions. The 6-foot-1, 220-pound Victoria, Texas, native has already broken single-season records for pass attempts by surpassing Mike White's 560 in 2017, pass completions by surpassing Brandon Doughty's 388 in 2015 and touchdown passes by surpassing Doughty's 49 in 2014.

Sterns has 1,539 yards and 12 touchdowns on 127 receptions this season, and has already blown away Taywan Taylor's record of 98 receptions in a season set in 2016.

"That's credit to the head man, coach Helton," Zappe said after Saturday's win. "... He took us underneath his wing and kind of put us all on one mission. We all got together as a brotherhood. The guys that were already here welcomed us as well. Like I said, it's credit to the big man. He's the little master behind the puppets – whatever you say about it – he's that guy. Credit to him for that. He's the head man for a reason."

The two aren't the only ones contributing to the top offense in C-USA and one of the best in the country. Others, like receiver Daewood Davis – who has 652 yards and eight touchdowns on 38 receptions after transferring from Oregon – Adam Cofield – WKU's second-leading

rusher with 373 yards and four scores on 80 attempts after transferring from North Dakota State in the offseason as WKU's first signee for the '21 class – and offensive lineman Boe Wilson – who transferred from Nebraska – have been key to the Hilltoppers' success with the ball.

But while the offensive transfers get much of the credit, those on the other side of the ball have been a big reason for WKU's second-half success this season.

Several of the Hilltoppers' defensive transfers came late, like Kahlef Hailassie, who has two interceptions in recent weeks, and Davion Williams, who also has two, including a pick-six against Marshall.

Against quality competition, WKU got off to a 1-4 start to the season and was allowing 38.4 points per game. In its current seven-game winning streak, it has allowed just 18.9 points per game.

“I think it was a huge part of our success this season,” WKU defensive coordinator Maurice Crum said.

“Obviously you want to try to get the kids in a little bit sooner to cut down on the learning curve and make sure they're comfortable because defense is a lot about reps and just getting comfortable in the system, but as you can see, we got some really good players and some really good pieces that helped us.

“ ... Having those pieces to shore up our depth to make us stronger in places where we need to with experienced players, guys who have been in college, guys who have

been in a program – you don't have to worry about the freshman woes of 'I'm homesick' and those things – you kind of get an older and more mature guy who's ready to play. I think it'll be instrumental in our success going forward."

A large part of the reason WKU went so heavy in the portal was because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The staff couldn't get out and recruit, and it wanted players that had already been at the college level. The NCAA gave fall sport student-athletes an additional year of eligibility amid the pandemic and approved the one-time transfer rule.

The Hilltoppers also had some gaps in their roster in the number of players in each class, and attacking the portal allowed the program to fill those needs for more balance. Heading into Saturday's game against Marshall, WKU had 16 seniors, 20 juniors, 23 sophomores, eight redshirt freshmen, 25 returning true freshmen and 13 incoming true freshmen.

WKU director of football player of personnel Zach Grant – one of the people responsible for vetting players who enter the portal – said in a March interview with the Daily News that after the 2020 season ended and through the first two weeks of January "it was just a monsoon in the portal," and that is expected to be the case again this season.

And now is that time of year again.

On Monday, 102 players entered the transfer portal. As of 11 a.m. CT Tuesday, 46 more had entered, according to 247Sports' Chris Hummer.

So where does that leave WKU – which already has a handful of commitments for the Class of 2022, including local standouts from South Warren Caden Veltkamp, Avrin Bell and Jake Jackson – when looking to the future of recruiting?

“I think, for us, I really like who we have currently on our football team,” Helton said. “I think we’ve got some really good young players – a lot of guys that have played for us that have made names for themselves that have extremely bright futures next year with this team, particularly our style of play offensively and defensively.

“... What I like about the portal is you have now until all the way up until fall camp to get it right. That’s a slow process for us. It’s not just something we dive right into and start taking guys. I always start with the person first, whether it’s a high school player, a junior college player or a guy that’s transferring in the portal. He has to be a great person, he has to be the right fit for our culture here at WKU and then he has to be a good player. That takes time and you just can’t go call a guy on the phone and say, ‘Hey, come to WKU,’ who just entered the portal, you know? I don’t think you’re going to be right when you do that. We’ll take our time with that piece and hopefully get some more balance this year, but I do like what we’ve got coming back. I think we’ve got a really good football team coming back next year.”{&end}

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