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WKU football

Taggart returning to WKU to face Tops

Former player, coach brings FAU to BG for big C-USA game

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Florida Atlantic head coach Willie Taggart looks on during a game against Massachusetts on Nov. 20, 2020, in Boca Raton, Fla.

MICHAEL REAVES/AP

Willie Taggart will be back on the sidelines at Houchens-Smith Stadium on Saturday, but on a different sideline than he's used to.

The former Hilltopper player and coach brings his Florida Atlantic team to Bowling Green to face Western Kentucky in a big Conference USA matchup.

“I typically go back to Bowling Green every year and visit,” Taggart told FAU reporters Monday at his weekly news conference. “I didn’t get to last year with COVID, so going back and seeing some things up there – it’s always nice to get back to Bowling Green and see the place where you spent half of your adult life at and a place that’s special to you.

“It’ll be fun, but again, it’s not about me, it’s about us going and trying to find a way to win a game against a really good football team.”

Taggart starred at quarterback for the Hilltoppers from 1995-98, setting 11 program records during his time, and had his jersey retired Oct. 23, 1999. In each of his last two seasons, Taggart – who was recruited by Jim Harbaugh to play for his father, Jack – was a finalist for the Walter Payton Award, given annually to the top player in I-AA football. He’s one of just four in the program to have his jersey retired, and he also was inducted into the WKU Athletic Hall of Fame in 2009.

For the following eight years after his playing career, Taggart worked as an assistant coach at WKU. During the 2002 national championship season, he was co-offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach.

He went to Stanford to work as the running backs coach for three seasons under Jim Harbaugh before returning to WKU ahead of the 2010 season as the program’s 17th head coach. The Hilltoppers, playing in the early part of the

transition to becoming an FBS program, entered the season on a 20-game losing streak and dropped their first six games of the season.

WKU finished 2-10 that fall, and followed it with a 7-5 mark in 2011 to become bowl eligible for the first time. The Hilltoppers went 7-5 the following season and were invited to the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl – the program’s first bowl invitation – but Taggart accepted the head coaching position at South Florida and departed before the game was played.

The Hilltoppers went 8-4 in 2013 under Bobby Petrino, 8-5 in 2014 under Jeff Brohm and 11-2 in the 2015 regular season under Brohm. WKU, ranked 25th in 2015, was matched up with Taggart and South Florida for the 2015 Miami Beach Bowl and won 45-35.

“Coach Taggart is a great coach. He’s done a fantastic job everywhere he’s been,” WKU head coach Tyson Helton said Monday at his weekly news conference. “He helped put this place on the map, in my opinion. I was one of the coaches that was probably able to reap some of the talent that he had left here when he had left. I know coach Petrino was here, but we played with some really good players here. Sure, we added our own talented players.

“Coach Taggart is a very, very good coach and he’s going to have his team ready to play. None of that really matters. The players are what makes the difference. As coaches, we prepare them during the week and get them ready to go and then when they hit the field that’s really all on them.

I'm sure it'll be neat for coach Taggart to come back to this place because this is a special place and he helped have success here, and it'll be good to see him as well."

After stops at Oregon and Florida State, Taggart ended up at FAU and last season faced WKU for the second time in his career. His Owls got the best of the Hilltoppers in a low-scoring, 10-6 game in Boca Raton, Fla.

This year's meeting is likely to be more high-scoring than last. The Owls rank seventh in C-USA at 27.1 points per game, while WKU has a revamped offense now coordinated by Zach Kittley that's averaged a league-best 41.4 points per game.

While in his first year at WKU, Kittley is plenty familiar with what Taggart has meant to the program.

"I know a lot about him, clearly what he did here as a player and a coach. He's helped build this program to what it is right now," Kittley said after Tuesday's practice. "I have nothing but a lot of respect for him, for what he did on the field here as well as what he's done in his coaching career. This program would definitely not be where it's at without coach Taggart, and I'm definitely very happy for all he did for this football program."

The game is an important one in C-USA, as the Hilltoppers currently sit atop the East Division at 5-1, with Marshall just behind at 4-2 and a meeting next week in Huntington,

W.Va., waiting. The Owls fell last week to Old Dominion and are currently 3-3 in the East, along with Charlotte, Middle Tennessee and ODU.

Kickoff is scheduled for 11 a.m. Saturday.}&end}

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