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WKU FOOTBALL

Another strong end to regular season under Helton has Tops in title game

WKU beats Marshall for seventh straight win

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Western Kentucky players celebrate Saturday after beating Marshall to c Stadium in Huntington, W.Va.

Steve Roberts/WKU Athletics

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. – Western Kentucky’s season didn’t start the way it would have liked record-wise, but the Hilltoppers didn’t blink.

“We’ve got our whole season in front of us, everything we want to accomplish is in front of us,” WKU head coach Tyson Helton said after his team’s loss to the University of Texas at San Antonio on Oct. 9.

The 52-46 defeat to the Roadrunners was the team’s fourth straight loss and put WKU in an early hole to start league play, but now the Hilltoppers are where they wanted to be at this time of year – getting ready for the Conference USA championship game.

WKU claimed the East Division title with a 53-21 victory over Marshall on Saturday at Joan C. Edwards Stadium in Huntington and with its seventh straight win, earned a berth in Friday’s league championship game against UTSA at the Alamodome in San Antonio.

“It’s been a roller coaster,” said WKU linebacker Jaden Hunter, who had a team-high nine tackles and two of his team’s four sacks against the Herd. “After the first five games we didn’t know where we are going to go. We had to come back together as a group. We met as a group after the UTSA game and really just dialed in, locked in on just those small details. The small details are the reason why we are where we are right now.”

WKU's slow start to the season came against quality competition. After beating UT Martin – which went on to the top 10 in the FCS rankings – the Hilltoppers lost at Army on the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, to Indiana at home and at Michigan State before opening C-USA play with a shootout loss to UTSA.

But since then, WKU has been rolling.

The Hilltoppers ended the losing streak and started their current winning streak with a 43-20 victory at Old Dominion. WKU followed with a 34-19 win at Florida International, a 45-13 win over Charlotte, a 48-21 win over Middle Tennessee, a 42-21 win at Rice and a 52-17 win over Florida Atlantic before Saturday's victory over Marshall in which they outscored the Herd 47-7 in the second half.

For the Hilltoppers, the key was getting everything clicking – offense, defense and special teams – and they've done that. Saturday's victory was a snapshot of the season in 60 minutes.

“At the very beginning of the season, we were talking about how we need to play as a team,” WKU quarterback Bailey Zappe said. “We need to start playing good on offense – offense helping defense out, defense helping us out and special teams helping both out.

“This game – like we've talked about multiple times – we came out flat, we didn't start fast and the defense was there to bail us out. They bailed us out until we were able

to get going and once we were able to get going, they kept playing like they were the whole game and we were able to put 53 on them and in a half we scored 47. If that ain't team football, then I don't know what is."

Strong finishes are nothing new for WKU under Helton, however.

Helton started his tenure as the Hilltoppers' head man with a loss to FCS Central Arkansas. It was part of a 1-2 start that featured a close win at FIU, but although it was unable to compete for the C-USA title because of losses to FAU and Marshall – this year's victories were WKU's first over the two programs since it last won a league title in 2016 – the Tops still finished the year 9-4 with a victory over Western Michigan in the SERVPRO First Responder Bowl.

Last season, WKU went just 5-6 in the regular season but rallied from a bad record early to win its last three regular-season games and earn a berth in the LendingTree Bowl.

"It's not about me – it's about the team," Helton said. "Our guys, they're just great men. Our locker room has a great culture, our staff – our players are a direct reflection of our staff. They do such a great job of making sure our players are well-trained, that they're good men, they do what they're supposed to do and that's what you need because it's a long season.

“It’s not how you start – it’s how you finish. We talk about that all the time and we’ve been able to finish strong the past couple years. We’ve got one more to go. We’ve got to finish strong.”

This season’s strong finish has the Hilltoppers playing for a championship.

WKU will get another shot at the one team in C-USA to take it down this year, and a chance to claim its first league title since winning back-to-back in 2015 and 2016.

“It feels amazing. At the very beginning of fall camp you make a goal to go to the conference championship and we have the opportunity to go there and play against a great UTSA team,” Zappe said. “We’re going to their spot, we’re going to their house, so it’s going to be a fun Friday and we’re looking forward to it.”

“I just feel like it’s a great opportunity,” WKU receiver Daewood Davis said. “Last time they came to our place. We fell short. We took it with a grain of salt. We came back and worked. We ended up here – East Division – and now we get to go play for all the marbles.”{&end}

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