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WKU SOFTBALL

WKU Softball Complex welcomes record crowd for win over Alabama

Tops take advantage of chance to 'grow the game of softball' in community

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Western Kentucky University fans cheer on the Hilltoppers during their 3-1 win over No. 5 Alabama at the WKU Softball Complex on Wednesday, April 27, 2022. The Hilltoppers knocked off one of the top teams in the country in front of a record crowd to improve to 31-9 and will play in a three-game series at Southern Miss starting Friday evening. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

James Webster, the father of Western Kentucky shortstop TJ Webster who is often seen leading the Hilltoppers' fans in cheers, had a much bigger group than usual to rile up Wednesday.

With an opportunity to grow support for the game in the community, the Hilltoppers welcomed a record crowd of 1,512 for their 3-1 upset victory over No. 5 Alabama at the WKU Softball Complex.

"I thought tonight was huge for the game of softball," WKU head coach Amy Tudor said. "Alabama coming into town was a huge thing for them to do. It grows our game. We were just excited to see all the people lined up outside the gate, and it was a signature win for us."

Wednesday's crowd topped the record previously set on April 20, 2016, when 1,323 came to watch the Hilltoppers take on No. 11 Kentucky. WKU lost that game 5-0, but came out on the winning side against the Crimson Tide thanks to a three-run first inning and a complete-game pitching effort from Bowling Green native Shelby Nunn.

"WOW! One of the all-time nights in (WKU softball) history with a (3-1) win over nation's No. 3 RPI Alabama in front of the largest crowd in program history!" WKU director of athletics Todd Stewart tweeted. "Go Tops!!"

It was a highly-anticipated matchup -- the program announced a sold-out game April 5 on social media, over three weeks before it would take place. Gates opened Wednesday at 3:30 p.m., and by that time a large crowd

was already lined up down the sidewalk on Creason Street waiting to claim their spot in the stands. Those who didn't have tickets were directed to the nearby parking structure that has a view of the field, and fans filled out each level of that for the game.

"It reminded me of a high school region game," Nunn said. "Me and Jess (Bush) were talking about that before the game. It's amazing to have a community that's so supportive."

WKU had averaged 217.1 fans through its first 21 home games leading up to Wednesday's contest, with the largest attendance in those coming in its series finale Sunday against Marshall when 331 fans watched the Hilltoppers run-rule the Herd 10-0 in five innings to take sole possession of first place in Conference USA's East Division. The Hilltoppers are now 20-2 at home this season.

"It was great. I had never seen that many people stand (in the parking structure). I had played here my freshman year and there was not that many people up there," said Bailey Curry, who started her college career at Toledo, before transferring to Louisiana for three years and to WKU in the offseason. "It was awesome. ... It was a great atmosphere."

The game against Alabama was the second time this season WKU welcomed a Power Five program to the WKU Softball Complex -- the game also gave Alabama first

baseman Kaylee Tow, a Madisonville North-Hopkins graduate, and pitcher Montana Fouts, an East Carter graduate, a chance to play in their home state.



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The Hilltoppers faced off against then-No. 10 Arkansas on March 21, and Wednesday marked the first time the program has hosted two SEC teams in the same season. The Hilltoppers and Razorbacks were tied through five innings, before Arkansas eventually won 8-1. That game was one of several close games against SEC programs for

WKU this season -- it was 0-4 against SEC teams entering Wednesday's game, including a 2-0 loss at Texas A&M and a 2-0 loss at Ole Miss.

On Wednesday, the Hilltoppers broke through for their first win against an SEC team this season and their first against Alabama all-time -- WKU was previously 0-6 against the Tide, which made it to the semifinal round of last year's Women's College World Series.

"If we can beat Alabama -- I'm not trying to jinx us or anything -- we can pretty much beat anyone. It's just knowing we can do it, going in and getting our pitch, doing our job and things work out," WKU third baseman Taylor Sanders said.

Wednesday night was just the latest part of a big season for the program.

The Hilltoppers, coming off a Conference USA title and NCAA Tournament appearance last year, are currently leading C-USA's East Division and are tied for the lead across the entire league with two series left in the regular season. While tied in the league standings, WKU's overall .769 winning percentage in 2022 is the top in C-USA, and with its sweep of UTEP earlier this season, the program picked up its 700th win all-time.

On April 15, the WKU Board of Regents approved the construction of a new indoor facility for the school's softball and soccer programs that will cost roughly \$3 million and will be paid for primarily with funds coming

from the exit fees of schools departing C-USA.

Groundbreaking is expected for this summer, with the completion planned for the summer of 2023.

The Tops' focus is on the remainder of this season, though.

WKU is scheduled to travel to Southern Miss for a three-game series starting Friday, before concluding the regular season with three games at the WKU Softball Complex against Middle Tennessee the following weekend. The C-USA Tournament is scheduled for May 11-14 at North Texas.

"I feel like we're very competitive. I feel like we've put ourselves in a position to compete at the highest level and it's a credit to my assistants, a credit to our team and a credit to our fans," Tudor said. "I think our fan base is huge, it's a game changer. Everybody plays a role in some form or fashion. It's trying to build a culture, and we're thankful for everyone that's helped out with that."

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