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Talented Tops need to take national step

BY JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
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BOWLING GREEN

Eight games into their 2022-23 basketball season, the Western Kentucky Hilltoppers have fashioned a sterling, if somewhat misleading 7-1 record — the program's best start on the hardwood in 16 years. Despite this, there is an undeniable feeling that the team has played nowhere near its full potential.

This, then, is a good thing for WKU fans.

Seventh-year head coach Rick Stansbury has assembled his deepest, most talented roster on the Hill to date, which is also a good thing for a program desperately thirsting for a trip to the NCAA Tournament — the last Big Dance drink for the Hilltoppers having come under Ray Harper a full decade ago.



So, it's a matter of Stansbury putting the pieces together, finding out which player combinations work best in various game situations, discovering who can be trusted at crunch time, and, most important of all, developing an overall confidence that produces the "killer instinct" possessed by every truly elite team (the scoreboard, after all, is turned on for a reason).

In other words, stepping on the court with a collective national power mindset producing a belief that they can, and should, win every game they play — the way Western Kentucky carried itself in its Ed Diddle/John Oldham heyday, when it established an unmistakable championship identity that consistently filled both the old Red Barn and Diddle Arena to the rafters.

Fear? Apprehension? Trepidation? Check all that junk at the door.

Why? Because of all this talent.

The starting five includes leather-tough 6-foot-1 junior point guard Dayvion McKnight, the team's assist leader (5.6 apg); 6-5 shooting guard Luke Frampton, who leads the nation in 3-point shooting by a country mile (62%); 6-8 sixth-year combo guard Emmanuel Akot, the team's leading scorer (13.3 ppg); 6-8 fifth-year steady-as-a-rock forward Jairus Hamilton; and 7-5 senior center Jamarion Sharp, the nation's leading shot-blocker last season, who is doing it again this season (5 bpg).

This means two of Western's five starters (Frampton and Sharp) lead the entire country in individual statistics. Ponder this for a moment.

This is a stout, seasoned lineup, to be sure, but it's this group in combination with players coming off the bench that provides the Hilltoppers an opportunity to break through nationally this season.

With confidence, Stansbury can call on the likes of sweet shooting 6-11 sophomore forward Fallou Diagne, second only to Frampton in 3-point accuracy (52%), dynamic 6-2 senior combo guard Jordan Rawls; 6-3 junior shooting guard Khristian Lander; spring-legged 6-7 junior forward Tyrone Marshall; and 6-6 junior shooting guard Dontaie Allen, a 3-point specialist currently on the sidelines via the NCAA because he was ineligible (grade issue) when he played seven games in the fall semester for Kentucky as a sophomore last season.

Allen (8 ppg), who is being forced to sit out seven games at WKU, should be available for duty Dec. 22 when Western wraps up the non-conference portion of its regular season slate at South Carolina.

The Hilltoppers need to take care of business and force themselves onto the national stage, because they're not there yet.

The NET rankings position WKU at No. 124 among the nation's 363 NCAA Division 1 teams; the Sagarin Ratings place the Tops at No. 114, the Pomeroy Ratings have them at No. 110, and RealTime RPI puts them at No. 72. Remember, Western was blasted by Akron (72-53) in the Cayman Islands Classic and blew a big lead and nearly lost in disastrous last-second fashion before escaping at Austin Peay (75-74).

Based on Western's recent Conference USA Tournament history (unrelenting and, in some cases, inexplicable heartbreak), the Hilltoppers need to maximize their opportunities throughout the regular season. In essence, a team this skilled and deep should blow out Wright State on Saturday, systematically dismantle one of the worst Louisville teams in history next Wednesday at the KFC Yum! Center and find a way to prevail at South Carolina.

In C-USA play, WKU must at the very least split with an outstanding UAB team, the overwhelming preseason favorite, and play well enough on the road to make a serious run at the regular season championship.

If it sounds like this is asking a lot, well, it is. Much is always asked of championship teams, and the Hilltoppers have every reason to aspire to be one.

Is this finally the year? We shall see.



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