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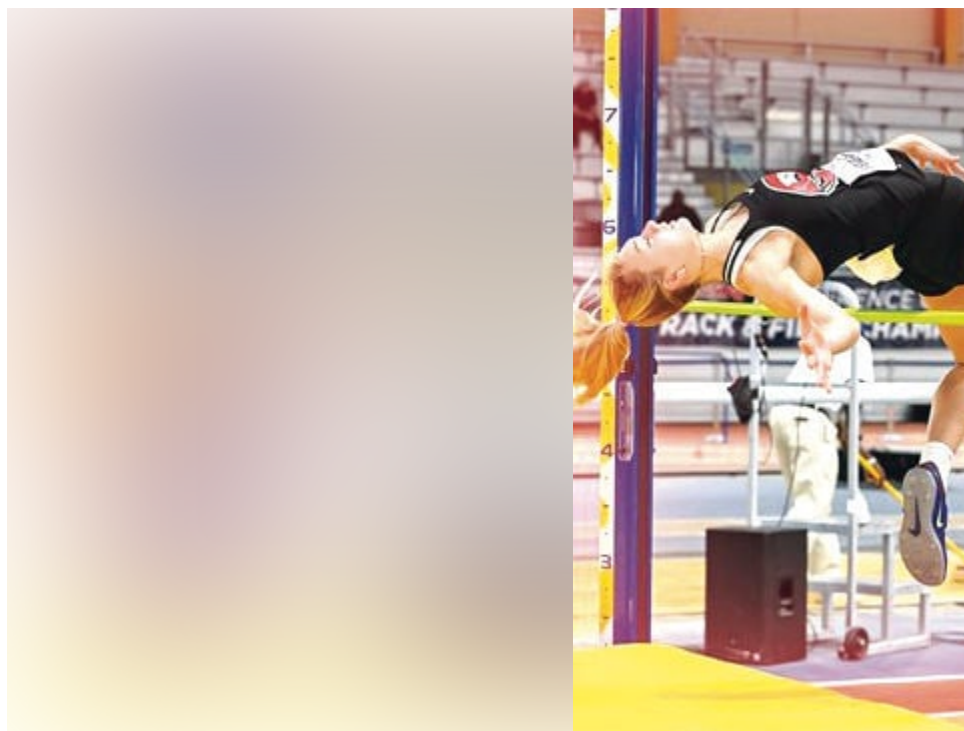
## WKU track and field/volleyball

# WKU's Isenbarger putting together 'special career' in two sports

Senior high jumper preparing to compete in NCAA Indoor Track & Field Championship

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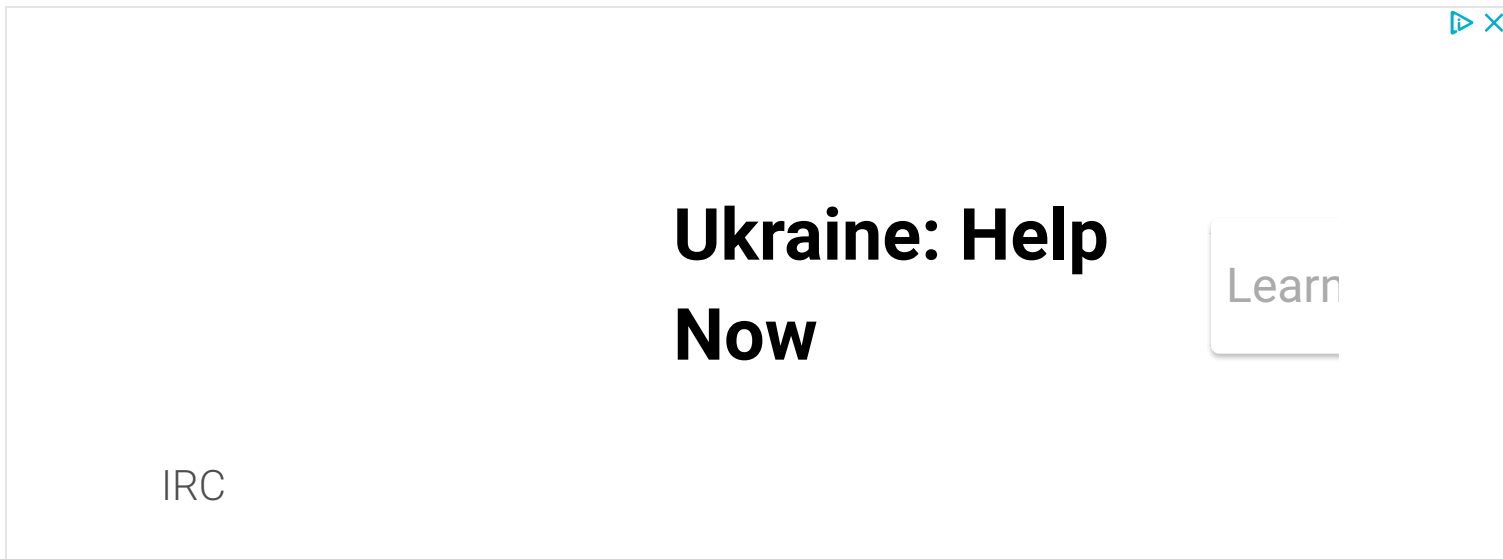


Western Kentucky senior Katie Isenbarger will compete in the women's high jump Championships on Saturday at the Birmingham Crossplex in Birmingham, Ala.

WKU ATHLETICS

When wrapping up an interview Friday, Western Kentucky volleyball coach Travis Hudson's thoughts turned to other athletes, instead of the one the questions were about – Katie Isenbarger.

The recent attention the WKU senior is getting isn't even for her work on the volleyball court, where she's been an all-Conference USA selection, received all-region recognition and helped her team to unprecedented success.

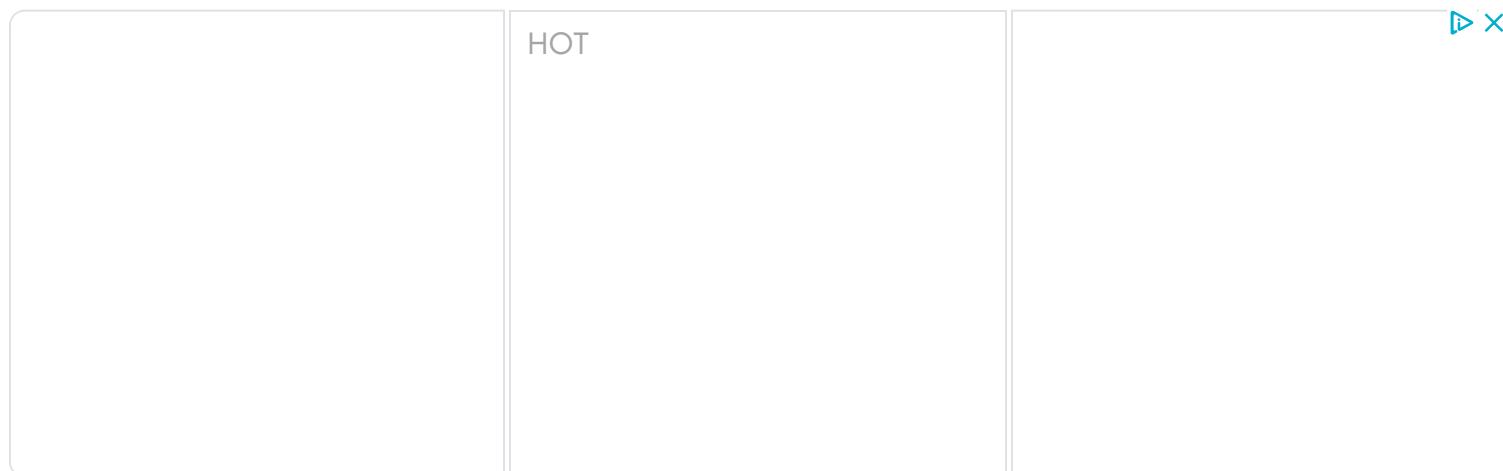


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It's for her work as a high jumper on the WKU track and field team this indoor season.



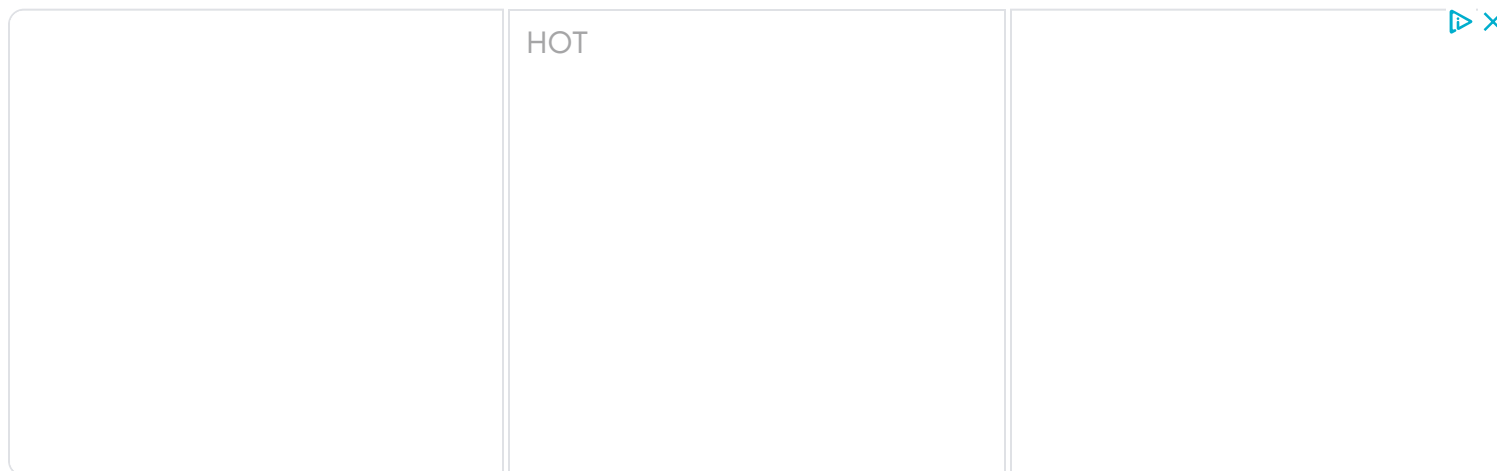
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"I'm guessing there's a lot of frustrated high jumpers around the country right now that have poured their hearts into it for however many years, day in and day out, and for her to just

throw the track shoes on and go practice four or five times – that’s got to be a really frustrating thing, but it just really speaks to how special she is,” Hudson said.

Isenbarger will compete in the women’s high jump finals at the NCAA Indoor Track & Field Championships on Saturday at the Birmingham Crossplex in Birmingham, Ala.



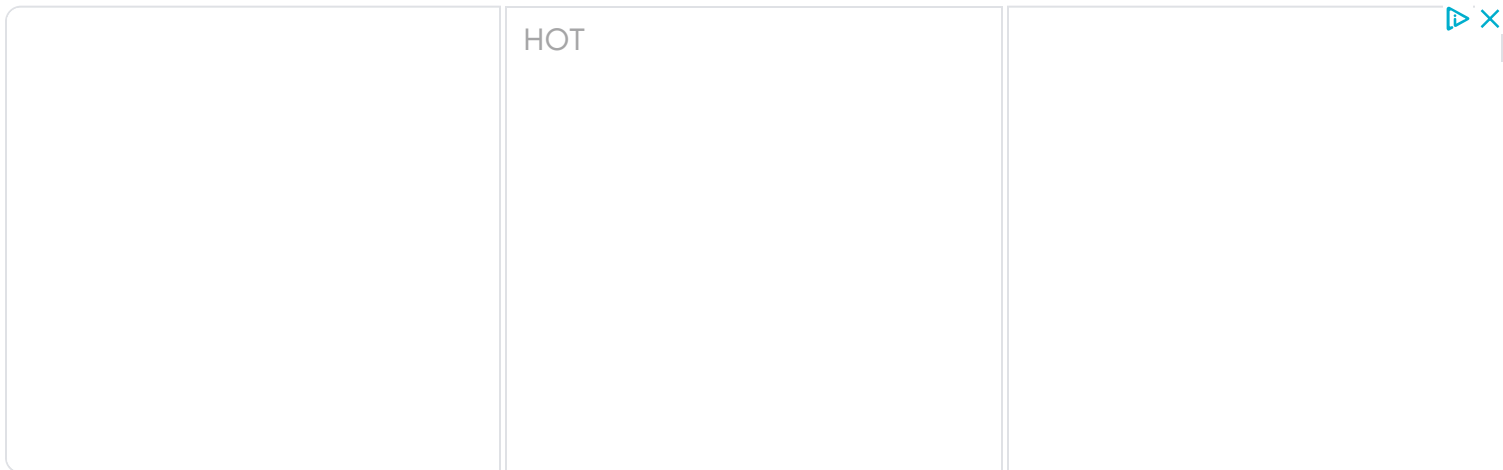
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She’s one of eight Lady Toppers since 2000 that have qualified for the indoor national championships and is the first qualifier since 2016. She’s the third female since 2000 to qualify for a field event in the championships and the first to do it in the high jump.

“I’m obviously very excited and very honored because I know a lot of high jumpers in the country don’t get this kind of opportunity,” Isenbarger said.

Isenbarger has already cemented her place in WKU’s record books leading up to the indoor finale. She holds four of the top five indoor high jump marks in program history, including the record of 6 feet at the PNC Bank Bellarmine Classic on Feb. 4 that allowed her to qualify for Saturday’s championships.



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Even more impressive is that she hadn't been able to compete in the sport in nearly two seasons.

Isenbarger, who was a three-sport athlete at Zionsville (Ind.) High School, was a four-time first team all-state selection in track and field and three-time finalist for the Indiana Female Athlete of the Year. She was the top-ranked female high jumper in the state as a senior and a finalist for the Team USA Junior World Games. Her top high school mark was 6-1.

She competed for WKU in the 2018-19 season, which included a win in the high jump at the Vanderbilt Invitational and a second-place finish in the C-USA Indoor Track & Field

Championships with a jump of 5-10.75 – a program record. In the spring, Isenbarger won the high jump at the C-USA Outdoor Championships and broke a 40-year-old program record for female outdoor high jump with her mark of 5-11.5.

Isenbarger jumped in two meets during indoor the next year, including a fifth-place finish at the C-USA Championships, but her outdoor season was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

College volleyball – her primary sport – was moved from fall 2020 to spring 2021, so she was unable to compete in indoor and outdoor track and field.

“When she started this year, we were jumping on a basketball floor in trainers, so it was the first time that we really trained together. It was like, ‘OK Katie, let me just see what you do,’ “ said WKU director of cross country/track and field Brent Chumbley, who took over the program in August 2019. “I guess lucky for me – I said, ‘OK, this is what I see and this is what I see,’ and she said, ‘Yep, those are the problems I have.’ OK, well, if those are the two things we have to look at right now, those are the two things that we’re going to focus on.”

In her first meet back – the PNC Lenny Lyles Invitational on Jan. 29 in Louisville – she broke her own record with a jump of 5-11.5 to win the event. She broke it again with her 6-0 jump at the PNC Bank Bellarmine Classic and is coming off a third-place showing at the C-USA Indoor Track & Field Championships in February – she hit 5-10 in the meet.

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“I was very surprised the very first time the very first meet,” Isenbarger said. “I was honestly just wanting to clear a bar because I hadn’t jumped in so long. I just felt really rusty. I wasn’t feeling very confident at all, so I was just hoping to at least clear a bar. I was very happy.”

Isenbarger only jumps in practice once or twice a week, and gets most of her workouts in with the volleyball program, which is in its spring session.

While often overshadowed by others on a star-studded roster, Isenbarger has put together a great career on the court.

She was an all-region honorable mention and a C-USA second team all-conference selection this past season, when WKU finished 28-2 and claimed its seventh regular-season league title and seventh league tournament title in eight chances. She owned a .385 hitting percentage with 160 kills for an offense with the second-best hitting percentage nationally.

In the spring, she was an AVCA all-region selection and C-USA second team all-conference member, starting all 24 matches and playing in every set for a team that went undefeated before a Sweet 16 loss to eventual national champion Kentucky – it was the first Sweet 16 appearance in program history. She hit .420 that season – a number that was second on the team, third in the league and 17th nationally.

WKU has gone a combined 83-5 over the last three seasons.

“It means a lot,” she said. “Just with volleyball and track and field – I can’t even explain it to you. I get to experience things in just one sport that most Division I athletes will never, ever get to experience. I’m very grateful for both.”

Chumbley jokes that he just feels “like I’m the driver to make sure she gets to the meet on time,” and says he believes her volleyball career has helped her track and field career.

“I see Katie can make a lot of adjustments that a lot of high jumpers cannot make at the meet or even during the approach because she is so used to making those little, fine adjustments in volleyball,” he said. “We’ve had a great setter in volleyball, but it’s not always the exact same place and the exact same height every time. She has to make those little adjustments in volleyball, so when she’s coming to the bar, if she realized, ‘Uh oh, I need to get that shoulder turned a little bit more or a foot turned a little bit more,’ she has no problem with that adjustment.”

Both of her coaches credit her “short memory” for a lot of her success – if one of her jumps is off or her attacks doesn’t go where she hopes, it’s over and she’s on to the next one.

Hudson – who recently finished his 27th season as WKU’s head coach – says he hadn’t had a multi-sport athlete before Isenbarger, but was open to the idea and encourages it in young athletes.

“She’s truly one of the best athletes to come through this place,” Hudson said. “If you pick either sport and look at her accomplishments, I think it would be a pretty special career and she’s done it twice.”



Chumbley feels the same, adding that she'll be an All-American in indoor track and field this season and will likely have a chance to qualify for the USA Outdoor Championships if she decides to pursue that.

“Is she one of the best athletes ever to come through here? Absolutely,” Chumbley said. “Usually gone are the days of the two-sport, three-sport athlete, things like this, but Katie is so special that she can do both of those. She’s a hall of fame student-athlete now. I don’t want to get her too much ego before the championship, but she is. ... She is certainly one of the premier athletes in the NCAA right now and in the history of Western Kentucky.”

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### Jared MacDonald

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