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WKU athletics building on success

By JOSEPH RUSSELL Messenger-Inquirer
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Todd Stewart

When Todd Stewart looks at the progress of Western Kentucky sports since he's been the university's athletic director, he can't help but tout the Hilltoppers' growth.

Stewart has been with WKU since 2008 and was named the AD in 2012. Since then, it's been an orchestrated upward trajectory for the school's student-athletes, coaches and administrators.

"I think first and foremost, our athletes deserve tremendous credit because they do a terrific job," Stewart said during a press conference in Bowling Green on Wednesday. "They do what they're supposed to do, but if we're only maintaining, we're falling behind. So we always have to be looking at things that we can improve. I feel like we've done that."

"I feel really good about the things that we have done because you have to evolve. But I think if you look at our athletic programs, and just our athletic department as a whole, I feel like, for example, five years ago, we were in a better place than we were 10 years ago. I feel like today we're in a better place than we were five years ago, and I feel like five years from now we'll be at a better place than we are today. That gives me confidence and optimism that, obviously, we're doing things the right way."

Stewart highlighted a number of recent causes for celebration, such as linebacker DeAngelo Malone and quarterback Bailey Zappe being selected in last week's NFL Draft, the WKU volleyball team going 83-5 with three straight trips to the NCAA Tournament in three seasons and the softball program upsetting No. 5 Alabama in front of a record crowd of 1,512 last week.

With all of Western's recent success, Stewart called the Hilltoppers "definitely nationally relevant" amidst an ever-fluid college sports landscape.

"There's a lot of change, right, and there has been, there is, and there will be, but if I'm an athlete thinking about where to go to school or if I'm the parent of a prospective male or female athlete, these are the things that I'm looking at: I'm looking at whatever place I go to, are they going to truly care about me as a person and are they going to look after me as an individual? And here you check that box. Then the second thing is, am I going to leave there with a

meaningful degree? WKU, you check that box. The third thing is, obviously, if they're coming here to play sports, then they want to know, are they going to develop as an individual and have a chance to win a championship? I think it's obvious you check that box."

Perhaps most importantly, Stewart added, is the chance for WKU student-athletes to thrive after college — an aspect boosted by the school's recent launch of the Hilltopper Local Exchange, a registry where area businesses can pursue Name, Image and Likeness deals.

"That's kind of the new normal, so it's huge," he noted. "It's vitally important that we have businesses want to work with our athletes and vice versa because there are a lot of other places where, obviously, that opportunity will exist. So it's good to see. (NIL has) been going on for the last year. We've had our athletes have opportunities, but I think it will continue to grow more and more as we move forward."

One area where Stewart hasn't been pleased, however, is what he considers a muddled NCAA transfer portal.

"I think we just need a little bit of clarity," he said. "It's gone from a set of very rigid rules and regulations to the wild, wild west seemingly overnight, and it's crazy some of the things that are happening. The thing that concerns me beyond all the obvious stuff is, ultimately, you're dealing with 18-to-22-year-olds and you want them to make the best decisions that they can make for their future. And I'm not sure that's happening as much as it should be.

"I think the transfer portal in and of itself is a good thing, I really do, and I think a lot of people that go into the portal, it's a good thing for them, but the fact that you literally have the equivalent of one-third of the college basketball programs in the country in the portal right now, I don't think it's a good thing."

Though Stewart can't do anything about transfer portal regulations, he said, he can at least work to make WKU the best it can be.

"I don't think there's ever been a better time to be a student-athlete here than there is now," he said. "There's a lot of challenges out there for athletic departments nationwide, but I feel like we are poised to continue the success that we've had and actually even build on it."

Joseph Russell