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WKU athletics WKU AD Stewart pleased with opportunities for athletes amid changing landscape

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Fans watch Western Kentucky's spring game last month at Houchens-Sr Joseph Barkoff/For the Daily News

The college sports landscape has changed dramatically over the last several years, and Western Kentucky is trying to keep up.

Todd Stewart, WKU's director of athletics, believes the school has put itself in a good position so far with changes to things like the transfer portal and name, image and likeness to help its athletes, with the goal to continue to provide more opportunities.

"It's been a very interesting time for college athletics, not just in the last few days or weeks, but really for a period of time," Stewart said Wednesday during a press conference covering a wide variety of topics. "At the same time, I think we've had a lot of great things going on here."



The most recent development has come with WKU's launch of the Hilltopper Local Exchange – a free student-athlete NIL business registry, custom-designed for approved businesses, collectives, donors, alumni and others wishing to connect with student-athletes. The “one-

stop shopping apparatus” is a customized portal where businesses and student-athletes can communicate, negotiate and enter NIL transactions.

“I think that’s kind of the new normal, so it’s huge – it’s vitally important we have businesses want to work with our athletes and vice versa because there are a lot of other places obviously where that opportunity will exist,” Stewart said. “It’s good to see, and it’s been going on for the last year. Our athletes have had opportunities, but I think it will continue to grow more and more as we move forward.”

Several of WKU’s standout athletes have posted on social media recently about the desire to work with local businesses through the program, like All-American volleyball player Paige Briggs and first-team All-Conference USA point guard Dayvion McKnight.

Several deals are already in place – McKnight has launched his own clothing line, and announced last week partnerships with Simply Mulch and attorney Keith Wilcutt, for example. Stewart says there are already over 20 local businesses signed up through the Hilltopper Local Exchange.

“That’s actually the second-highest number of businesses among any Group of Five school in the nation right now and it’s more than a lot of Power Fives,” Stewart said. “There are a lot of people that want to work with our athletes and our athletes will have a lot of opportunities moving forward to monetize.”

While the Hilltopper Local Exchange was only announced in late April, WKU has worked with INFLCR to try to provide opportunities since the start of NIL. Shortly after NIL began, WKU launched the CLIMB program to help athletes capitalize on their brands, but WKU believes the launch of the new Hilltopper Local Exchange will improve the opportunities for its athletes.

Athletes are now able to connect directly through the Hilltopper Local Exchange and make deals with businesses – the biggest issue found before its launch, where many had to go through social media to try to connect.

“The biggest thing so far is that we can’t broker these deals ourselves. We can obviously put all the resources in the world in front of them, but in the end, businesses and student-athletes are going to have to find each other,” WKU senior associate athletic director Zach Greenwell said on WKU’s “Beyond The Hill” podcast released May 3. “... Hilltopper Local Exchange, the new platform we launched, really helps solve both of those problems. What we’re able to do now is we’re able to put them as close together as we possibly can without being involved directly in the deal.”

NIL, in combination with changes to the transfer portal with a one-time transfer waiver, have created challenges for many athletic departments, however.

Stewart says “it’s never been harder to manage a roster for coaches than it is right now,” because of these changes, and compares it to free agency in professional sports.

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“The best example that comes to mind, if you think about pro sports, everybody has a contract. You know ahead of time who’s going to be a free agent and you can plan accordingly,” Stewart said. “The tough thing with college athletics as it is right now, is nobody has a contract and everybody’s a free agent every year. That change to the system is just a huge challenge for all coaches, but we’ll figure it out. I think we’ve already figured it out to some extent.”

Stewart uses the 2021 football team as an example of adapting to the changes with transfers.

Nearly a quarter of the roster was incoming transfers, including star quarterback Bailey Zappe who was recently selected by the Patriots in the fourth round of the NFL

Draft, and the team played in its first Conference USA championship game since winning back-to-back titles in 2015 and 2016.

WKU's men's basketball program has lost several players to the transfer portal this season for varying reasons, with the most notable being 7-foot-5 center Jamarion Sharp, C-USA's Defensive Player of the Year. The Hilltoppers have also added players from the portal from Power Five programs in Kentucky transfer Dontaie Allen and Indiana transfer Khristian Lander.

With the rapid changes over the last two years, many are calling for stricter regulations in regard to the transfer portal and NIL.

The Verbal Commits Twitter account, which reports on recruiting and transfer portal entries in college basketball, wrote May 6 that there were over 1,675 names in the transfer portal this offseason. There were 358 Division I programs in the country last season.

There have been several reports of players transferring or returning to college based on NIL opportunities.

Kentucky's men's basketball team drew attention recently when a member of its staff tweeted in part that "we will not guarantee money as an inducement" after reports surfaced that recruitment of South Dakota State transfer Baylor Scheierman ended after NIL demands were made. In April, Miami guard Isaiah Wong's agent said he would

transfer if his NIL compensation wasn't increased – Wong later released a statement saying the comments were made without any authorization on his behalf.

“The easiest thing in society is to identify a problem. That’s easy. The hard thing is to identify a solution. There is a problem right now and I know a lot of people want to pile on the NCAA and I think, in some cases, it’s deserved, but I don’t think they deserve all the blame. I think you could spread a lot of blame out in a lot of areas,” Stewart said. “What I would say is the NCAA is the governing body of our sport and they have some people there that are paid extremely well. We needed them to lead. We needed them to lead over the last two years and they weren’t able to do that. They weren’t able to get us to a solution. We all kind of saw this coming and nevertheless we weren’t able to avoid it.

“Again, it’s not all their fault by any stretch, but we needed them to lead and they weren’t able to get us to a better place than we’re at right now. The tough thing right now, it sort of feels like they’re in the witness protection program. I don’t even know where they are in respect to everything that’s going on. Everybody sort of feels like there will be some sort of parameters put into place – I hope that there are. I think we just need a little bit of clarity. It’s gone from a set of very rigid rules and regulations to the wild, wild west seemingly overnight.”

“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. 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 right now, I don't think it's a good thing. When 35% of the players are in the portal, I just don't think that's a good thing and that's not going to be a good outcome for many of them."

But with all the recent changes, Stewart believes WKU is in a good position to assist its athletes. He included multiple reasons for that belief – that WKU cares about its athletes and will look at them as people, a quality education, an opportunity to improve and win championships and preparation for life after WKU.

"Those four things happen here, and then the ability to monetize themselves ... I don't think there's ever been a better time to be a student-athlete here than there is now," Stewart 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."}

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