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WKU FOOTBALL

GOODE TO GO: Tops' offensive lineman healthy after injury-shortened season

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Western Kentucky left tackle Mark Goode awaits the snap during the Tops' 49-17 win against Hawaii on Sept. 3 in Honolulu.

STEVE ROBERTS/WKU Athletics

Western Kentucky's Mark Goode made the most of his time when an injury cut short his first season starting at left tackle.

“I’ve just been really trying to grow my football IQ, the mental side of the game,” Goode said. “Obviously rehabbing, but really trying to take this time to get bigger and stronger while I have the chance.”

Goode, a 6-foot-6, 300-pound Hodgensville native, won a starting spot on the Tops’ offensive line last fall and proceeded to protect WKU quarterback Austin Reed’s blind side from that left tackle spot – right up until the final offensive series in an Oct. 8 loss to UTSA at the Alamodome, when Goode suffered a knee injury that turned out to be a season-ender.

Since then, Goode has been working his way back onto the field.

“I’m feeling good,” Goode said after Tuesday’s spring practice. “You know, I’ve been grinding in the training room and I’m really thankful for our training staff. They work with me every single day. But yeah, I’m definitely getting back to where I used to be.”

Goode’s return is a huge boost for WKU’s offense, which lost starting center Rusty Staats and tackle Gunnar Britton – who moved from the right side to left after Goode’s injury – as transfers. But with Goode back, the Tops can still count on four returning starters on the line. Junior Quantavious Leslie earned All-Conference USA honorable mention honors at left guard, while Vinnie Murphy started all 14 games at right guard after transferring in from South

Carolina. Wes Dorsey, who became a starter at right tackle midway through last season after Goode was sidelined, also offers plenty of experience.

As a unit, WKU's offensive line allowed only 14 sacks last season – that mark ranked 10th best in all of college football and second in Conference USA. It's a group that also provided the time for Reed to flourish in his first year starting at quarterback for the Tops. Following in the footsteps of record-setting quarterback Bailey Zappe, Reed made sure WKU's offense didn't miss a beat as he passed for a nation-leading 4,744 yards and 40 touchdowns.

With new offensive coordinator Drew Hollingshead working in run-and-shoot elements to the Tops' already pass-heavy scheme, that experience on the line will be crucial to keeping Reed upright this coming season.

"It takes awhile," Goode said. "That's what springs and summers are for, though. Usually by the time you roll into fall camp, we're one single unit of five guys working together as one."

Unlike many position groups this spring, WKU's offensive line has the added benefit of stability at the top. Zach Lankford, the Tops' co-offensive coordinator and offensive line coach, has been coaching Goode and his teammates since they day they arrived on campus.

"I think we're adapting," Goode said. "You know coach Lankford, he does a great job making sure we know what's going on. We've got five guys that love to compete and do

whatever it takes to win. When you have that, you can do pretty much anything."

Goode knows his starting job – let alone that spot at left tackle – still has to be won. That work is going on now in spring practice and will continue right up through the fall.

"I'm going to do whatever coach Lankford tells me to do," Goode said. "My priority is this team and the team's success over my individual success. You know, whatever position they need me to play I'll do it." – *Follow sports editor Jeff Nations on Twitter @Jeff_NationsBG or visit bgdailynews.com.*

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