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Helton has solidified WKU grid culture

BY JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
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As difficult as it is to believe (and, it's darn difficult), Tyson Helton will begin his fifth season as football head coach at Western Kentucky a week from Saturday, when his highly touted Hilltoppers play host to South Florida at Houchens/Smith Stadium.

It's supposed to be a big season for WKU, which is a prohibitive favorite to win the Conference USA championship. But it's business as usual for the ever-steady Helton, whose understated leadership approach has helped turn the Hilltoppers into one of the most prolific offensive forces in all of college football.

In three of Helton's four seasons at the helm, Western has won nine games. Three times, the Hilltoppers have won bowl games. He's put a record-setting quarterback into the NFL (Bailey Zappe, New England).

Now, WKU is hoping to take the next step as a significant player on the national landscape.

Helton, however, won't allow the team to get too ahead of itself, or too full of itself — knowing that consistent work ethic, on-field execution, and a humble, disciplined mindset will elevate the program much higher than anyone's preseason prognostications.

"There's still a long way to go, a lot of work to be done, to make us the team we believe we can become," Helton said. "So far, we're on pace to be right where we should be, but we have to keep working in every area of the game if we expect to reach our potential. We can't afford to be satisfied — not ever."

This get-the-job-done approach has been key in Western continuing its ascension as a well-respected FBS program. It's also a major reason why quarterback Austin Reed, the nation's leading passer in 2022, and wide receiver Malachi Corley, who made 101 receptions and led the country in yards after contact, decided to return to WKU — when both could have gone elsewhere.

"I just think it just speaks to the culture Tyson Helton has created here that players (such as Reed and Corley) both came back to the program," 12th-year WKU athletic director Todd Stewart said. "That doesn't happen if they don't feel good about the program, their coaches, their teammates, and, indeed, their university."

And, make no mistake, Stewart is thankful Helton is still around, as well.

“I think it shows how much Tyson likes it here, how much his family like’s it here,” Stewart said. “I’m not naive enough to think there couldn’t come a time when he has an opportunity that he just can’t turn down, but he’s not looking for that — someone would have to come to him.

“He’s taken our program to four straight bowl games, and won three of them, and he’s still here — that’s unprecedented in our program. So, we’re all very fortunate here, and our community as a whole is very fortunate that he has shown the loyalty he has shown.”

And, it seems to have carried over to the Hilltopper football team, the members of which speak constantly of family, brotherhood, tradition, and legacy.

“I really like our football team’s camaraderie,” Helton said. “These guys are highly competitive on the field, but they love each other at the end of the day. All the new guys we’ve brought in have adapted very well to what we’ve already established here, so there’s a good cohesiveness, which is what you want to see.

“I like the way we compete day in and day out, the way we pull together as a team, and the way our players and coaches embrace the expectations others have of them.

“The goal at Western Kentucky always is to win championships, win bowl games, and make a national impact — our guys understand and appreciate that this will never change.”

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