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Lutz eager to make WKU a national power

By JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
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Steve Lutz

BOWLING GREEN — A standing-room-only crowd comprised of hundreds of Western Kentucky basketball fans thirsty for national success filled the Harbaugh Stadium Club on Monday morning to greet Steve Lutz, who was introduced as the 16th head coach in Hilltopper history.

They liked what they heard from the 50-year-old who immediately turned around a losing culture at Texas A&M Corpus Christi — leading the Islanders to consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances and a victory in the Big Dance in his only two seasons there.

“I’m not shy about what we’re after here,” said an energetic Lutz, successor to Rick Stansbury, who resigned at the conclusion of a disappointing 2022-23 season. “We’re here to win games, we’re here to win conference championships, we’re here to go to the NCAA Tournament and to win games in the NCAA Tournament — and we will do it with integrity.

“I fully understand what it means to be the head coach at Western Kentucky University, and what jumps off the page for me is the rich history of this great program. Third all-time in conference championships, tenth all-time in 20-win seasons, and so much more.

“This is what I want to be a part of, where it means something to be successful for everyone on the campus and in the community. Diddle Arena, when it’s full, is one of the loudest and best places to play college basketball in America, and that’s the way we want it to be in the seasons to come.”

WKU president Timothy Caboni, a student on the Hill in 1993 when Ralph Willard coached the Hilltoppers to the NCAA Tournament Sweet 16, cut to the chase in terms of what he expects from the program.

“We expect to compete in everything we do at this university,” Caboni said, “and we know there are high expectations for our men’s basketball program. We are going to meet those expectations, and I know we have the right coach to make this happen.

“We’re going to bring back the excitement to Diddle Arena.”

WKU athletic director Todd Stewart echoed those sentiments.

“We have a tremendous person to lead our program — someone with a proven track record of success,” Stewart said. “He created a winning culture at Texas A&M Corpus Christi in two short years. They had four losing seasons before he arrived, and were 5-19 the year before he arrived.

“What’s more, he has coached in seven consecutive NCAA tournaments (two at Corpus Christi, four at Purdue as an assistant, one at Creighton as an assistant).

“He was on our list from the get-go, and every conversation I had about him, every piece of information I received about him was positive. As the process evolved, he was clearly, to me, the number one person for the job.

“Steve Lutz is the right person at the right time to lead WKU basketball.”

Lutz, who met with members of the Hilltopper team on Sunday, outlined his recruiting philosophy.

“We want to recruit really good people and really good players, because you can’t succeed without good players,” Lutz said. “We want to nurture and develop them as people and as players, and we want to make sure they graduate. If we can check all these boxes, good things are ahead of us.

“Our standard of excellence is not going to be for everyone. I’m looking for character, competitiveness, skill, and a strong passion for playing basketball.

“We want the best players and the best people, and if we get them here we have an opportunity to be one of the premier basketball programs in the United States.”

Lutz indicated that the Hilltoppers will be a high-octane outfit on the hardwood moving forward.

“We’ll be very aggressive and very entertaining at both ends of the floor,” he said. “We’re going to take the first best shot we get at the offensive end and we’re going to be unselfish, sharing the basketball.

“Defensively, we’re not going to allow our opponents to do what they want to do. We want to make it uncomfortable for them, make it hard for them to score. Everything starts with defense because there will be nights when our shots aren’t falling, and we have to be able to win games with defense.

“Beyond this, we want to be the hardest-playing team on the floor every game we play.”

Lutz inherits a WKU program that has not reached the NCAA Tournament since 2013.



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