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## WKU FOOTBALL 'Easy fit' Simpkins shines in variety of roles for Tops

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WKU junior defensive back Kendrick Simpkins (center) sacks South Florida quarterback Byrum Brown during a Sept. 2 game at Houchens-Smith Stadium.

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Kendrick Simpkins showed up as an incoming freshman at Western Kentucky with an open mind and a relentless appetite to put in the work to get on the field as soon as possible.

Part of WKU football coach Tyson Helton's 2020 recruiting class, Simpkins was among a future star-studded group that signed in the late February period.

That six-man group included linebacker JaQues Evans, a first-team All-Conference USA pick and this season's preseason CUSA Defensive Player of the Year. Wide receiver Malachi Corley was also a late signee that year, and last year emerged as a bonafide star after leading the nation in yards after the catch (975) and forcing 40 missed tackles while 101 receptions for 1,295 yards and 11 touchdowns. Left tackle Quantavious Leslie has emerged as a vital part of the Hilltoppers' line that has allowed only five sacks this season – a remarkable number considering the team's well-known pass-first tendencies.



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Junior-college transfer cornerback Dominique Bradshaw spent three productive seasons as a part-time starter and regular contributor, while quarterback Darius Ocean saw limited time before transferring out after last season.

Then there's Simpkins, who worked his way into playing time that first freshman season in 2020 – he got another due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since that very first appearance on Oct. 24, 2020 against Chattanooga, the 6-foot, 196-pound junior from Montgomery, Ala., has steadily risen to become one of WKU's very best players on the defensive side.

“Coming in from high school, I mean the hopes are big but it was more than I thought,” Simpkins said. “When I got here, I was just a little snotty-nosed freshman, you know what I'm saying? But I had some great guys in the safety room and on this team that just embedded in me and kept working with me and just instilling things in me that they knew that I had even when I was younger.”

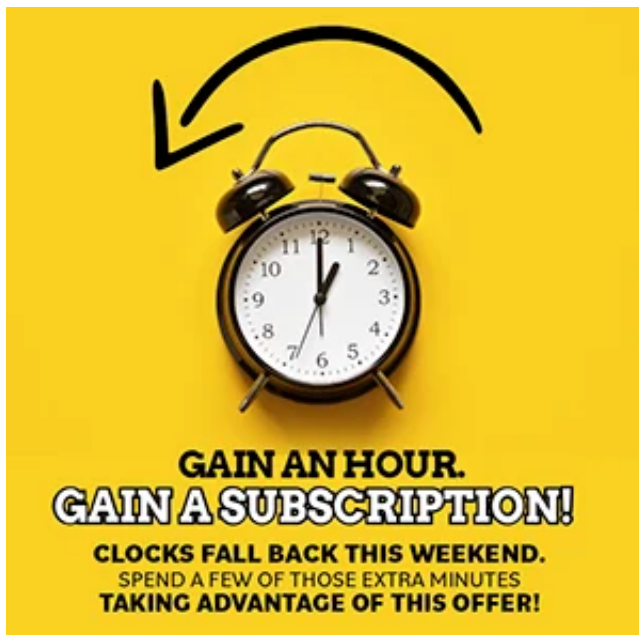
Simpkins credits a number of role models with helping him find the right path quickly to become a contributor, then a regular and now a star for the Tops. Simpkins rapidly rattles off the names of those early influencers – former WKU defensive backs like Devon Key (now with the Denver Broncos), Antwon Kincade, A.J. Brathwaite and Bradshaw, plus defensive end DeAngelo Malone (now with the Atlanta Falcons).

It's an eclectic mix of safeties, cornerbacks, edge rushers and hybrid linebackers – which makes sense. Simpkins has been all of those things for the Tops, sometimes playing multiple spots during the same game.

“Kendrick’s been a great player for us and really came along,” WKU defensive coordinator Tyson Summers said. “He got injured early in the season a year ago, so he didn’t play as much the first two or three games. When he did come back a year ago, he kind of started out as what we’d call a dime linebacker. And then he wound up going free safety, wound up going strong safety, went through camp as really a nickel for us. So one thing, really he can play all four spots and has played all four for us through the year.”

Simpkins tallied 21 tackles in his second freshman season in 2021, including his first career start. Last season, he saw action in all 12 games and totaled nine starts while tallying 42 tackles, one interception and three pass breakups.





This season Simpkins has been asked to do even more – much more. With several key WKU defensive players sidelined with long-term injuries, Evans and standout starting cornerback Upton Stout among them, it has been Simpkins who has often served as the tip of the spear in the Tops’ blitzing attack.

“It does suit my game,” Simpkins said. “I’m not a very passive person. I’m an aggressive person whether that’s covering, whether that’s blitzing, whatever it is – the position I play, the type of mentality I have it kind of fit all together so I have no problem with that. It’s just been great.”

Simpkins has responded with a season worthy of serious all-conference consideration. Through seven games – he missed the road game at Ohio State due to injury – Simpkins leads the Hilltoppers with 4 1/2 sacks, 7.5 tackles

for loss, six quarterback hurries and three forced fumbles. He's second on the squad with 33 tackles, trailing only fellow safety Talique Allen's 40 stops.

Summers has relied on Simpkins' steady presence and knack for game-changing plays as part of a defense that is tied for third nationally with 18 takeaways this season after leading the country with 32 forced turnovers and six defensive touchdowns last year.

"I think the big thing with Kendrick is he plays physical and he's smart," Summers said. "He's a guy that can look at a lot of different things pre-snap that are able to help him. He knows the issues with each coverage, he knows the issues with each part of the run game. And ultimately, he's a guy that wants to be able to make a play. And when you are trying to find and you are trying to design things, he's an easy fit to do that because he can do a lot of different things for you.

"He plays well in coverage, he plays well in run fits and he can play all four spots. So as we've had different injuries over the course of the last two years, he's been able to fit all those things. He's very much a conceptual learner, understands the big picture. But he's a guy that wants to be able to make the play and has done a great job for us.

"I do think he's extremely explosive, understands what blocks he's getting and works really hard at being able to see what he's going to get from each individual person he

may take on in a one-on-one. So smart guys that play hard, man, those are the guys that you want to be able to have and he's certainly one of those."

Simpkins has accepted his variety of defensive assignments without complaint and has generally excelled wherever he's been asked to play. That's a trend he takes pride in and very much intends to continue for the Tops. WKU (4-4 overall, 2-2 CUSA) is back in action Saturday at conference rival UTEP for an 8 p.m. matchup at the Sun Bowl in El Paso, Texas.

"It's great to have a defensive coordinator like coach Summers and to have the different defenses and be able to have the different plays for people with different skill sets," Simpkins said. "I think that's why a lot of people have success in the defense and have over many years. It's been great just playing all the different positions and being the Swiss army knife, especially with a couple key guys down."

"... It is a good role this year, but my job being a leader is just doing whatever the coaches ask me and whatever the play is. Of course it's been a lot of different things, but I can't complain – just doing whatever is best for this defense and this team."

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