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Lutz era begins with a big bang at WKU

By JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
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BOWLING GREEN — The Steve Lutz era began with a big bang for the Western Kentucky Hilltoppers on Monday night.

WKU blitzed Kentucky Wesleyan with a 14-0 run to open the second half and went on to roll past the Panthers 90-64 in a men's college basketball game before a festive and intrigued crowd in E.A. Diddle Arena.

"We played winning basketball, and I'm glad we got the win," said Lutz, who succeeded Rick Stansbury at the Hilltopper helm following the 2022-23 season. "We shared the ball, played good defense, played hard, and we rebounded the basketball pretty well.

"There were some lapses with it being our first game, of course, but all in all I was proud of the effort our guys put forth. This was a good way to start our season."



The Hilltoppers led by just six points at halftime, but came out blazing at the start of the second half.

Brandon Newman scored six points in a decisive run that stretched WKU's lead to 51-31 with just under 16 minutes remaining.

Wesleyan, which won at Louisville last Monday, didn't score its first points of the second half until Kaveon Mitchell drained a 14-footer at the 15:23 mark.

Another basket by Mitchell, at 11:40, pulled the Panthers within 59-46, but Western answered with a 12-4 run to stretch the lead back with 21 points with eight minutes remaining.

Khristian Lander buried a pair of 3-pointers and Dontaie Allen hit another in an 11-0 spree that provided the Hilltoppers with their largest lead of the game, 86-55, with just over three minutes to play.

"We came out in the second half and made some early shots that gave us some confidence," Lutz said. "We didn't let the way we shot it (from distance) in the first half (1-of-10) affect the way we shot it in the second half (5-of-10), and that's a good sign."

WKU never trailed in the first half, but the Panthers hung around.

A layup by Alex Gray pulled the Panthers within 8-7 four minutes into the contest before junior forward Babacar Faye went to work on the inside — scoring six straight points to push the Hilltoppers in front, 14-7.

Kennedy Miles answered with a 16-footer for Wesleyan, but Don McHenry, Lander and Fallou Diagne keyed a 6-0 run that provided Western its biggest lead of the half, 20-9, at the 10:03 mark.

KWC, however, refused to fold.

NaVuan Peterson scored four points in an 8-2 spree that pulled the Panthers within 26-22 at 5:25.

The Hilltoppers rebuilt their advantage to eight points on a 3-pointer by Newman at 1:05 — WKU's only triple of the half — but a follow shot by Edward Jones Jr. just before the halftime horn pulled Wesleyan within 37-31 at intermission.

“WKU was the better team tonight,” KWC coach Drew Cooper said. “They’re very athletic and they put together a big run on us at the start of the second half that we couldn’t recover from.

“The start of the second half was really disconcerting, but we’ve got to just put this one behind us and move on.”

The Hilltoppers’ ultra-balanced attack was led by Newman, who finished with 14 points and six rebounds, and Faye, who had a double-double with 12 points and 10 rebounds. Teagan Moore scored 12 points in only 16 minutes, and Lander added 10 points, five rebounds and three assists.

WKU sizzled from the field in the second half, hitting 18-of-28 shots for 64%. The Hilltoppers outrebounded Wesleyan 36-29 and forced 22 turnovers, which led to 31 points.

Logan McIntire, who scored 15 points, was the Panthers' only double-digit scorer. Gray paced the Panthers with six rebounds and four assists.

KWC was limited to 40% shooting overall and made just 7-of-29 shots from 3-point range (24%).

Western returns to action Thursday at Wichita State, and KWC is back on the hardwood Friday hosting Illinois-Springfield at the Sportscenter.

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