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WKU hoop fans in for a fun ride with Lutz

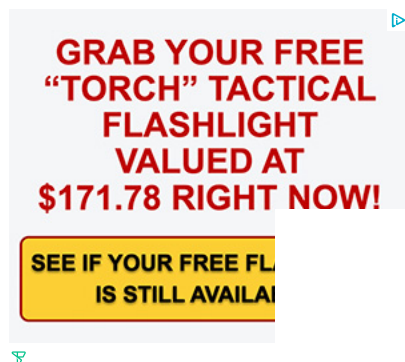
BY JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
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Well, well, well, well, well — it's been a long time coming, but there it was, right before the eyes of every fan who attended Monday night's men's basketball season opener between Western Kentucky and Kentucky Wesleyan.

Indeed, there it was, in living color — a well-conditioned Hilltopper team that for a full 40 minutes scratched and clawed, hustled and hounded, moved and communicated, shot the ball with confidence, climbed the backboards with tenacity, and played nose-the-grindstone defense as if their very life depended on it.

Welcome to the Coach Steve Lutz era at WKU.

By game's end, Western had defeated Kentucky Wesleyan, 90-66 — scorching the Panthers with a 14-0 blitz to open the second half; pulling away from the proud, tradition-rich, eight-time NCAA Division II program by imposing its will with eye-popping passion. After intermission, this was no contest.



Please note with indelible ink: This was the same high-quality Kentucky Wesleyan team that just a week earlier had fairly and squarely defeated the University of Louisville 71-68 in the KFC Yum! Center, the same KWC team that gave Travis Ford's Saint Louis Billikens all they wanted and then some before bowing 85-75 in its exhibition opener on Oct. 24.

For WKU fans, however, the result of Monday's game placed a distant second to the way the Hilltoppers played.

This was an all-out, pedal-to-the-metal assault that was dizzying at times. Players diving on the floor for loose balls, deflecting numerous passes, blocking shots, blocking out, causing general havoc at the defensive end, and playing with efficiency at the offensive end; pounding the ball to the paint, driving to the rack, orchestrating the inside-out approach with purpose and aplomb

I mean, who in the name of Clem Haskins were were these guys?

Well, there was 6-foot-5 senior guard Brandon Newman, a leather-tough Purdue transfer who led Western with 14 points, adding five rebounds.

There was Babacar Faye, a quick-jumping, high-leaping 6-8 junior forward from the College of Charleston, who produced the game's only double-double — 12 points, 10 rebounds.

There was Teagan Moore, a multifaceted 6-5 freshman guard out of Owen County — more specifically Dry Ridge, Kentucky — who scored 12 points and dished an assist in only 16 minutes.

There was 6-3 senior guard Khristian Lander, the former Indiana transfer who produced 10 points, five rebounds and three assists.

There was returning 6-7 senior forward Tyrone Marshall, who scored nine points, the trio of 6-10 fifth-year senior Rodney Howard (Georgia Tech), 6-2 junior guard Don McHenry (Indian Hills Community College), and 6-6 junior guard Enoch Kalambay (Indian Hills CC) — each of whom scored eight points.

But, true to the Lutz creed of playing those who have earned the right to play, there was 5-10 (that's generous) pepper-pot freshman walk-on Jack Edelen, out of Louisville Male. He doesn't pass the eye test getting off the team bus, perhaps, but he sure does pass it on the hardwood.

Edelen took one shot (he missed it), but played in-your-face defense, and quarterbacked the Hilltopper offense intelligently enough to garner 23 minutes — most on the team.

Here's another thing about Lutz you can take to the bank: If you don't play defense with regularity, if you don't hustle up and down the court with regularity, and if you hang your head and pout with regularity, you're going to spend enough time on the far end of the Hilltopper bench to become very well acquainted with the team's managers and trainers.

Lutz will tolerate none of this — ever — and Hilltopper fans are going to absolutely love him for it.

Make no mistake, Lutz's first Western squad will not remind anyone of John Wooden's greatest UCLA teams, and the Hilltoppers will certainly not be favored to win tonight at Wichita State, one of the toughest road challenges in America, but know this: Hilltopper basketball is already on much higher

ground.

The Steve Lutz era is underway, and dyed in the wool WKU fans — who haven't tasted the NCAA Tournament since 2013 — can't wait to discover where it will lead them.

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