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Lutz says Tops have what it takes to contend

By JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
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Steve Lutz

BOWLING GREEN — More than a decade removed from its most recent appearance in the NCAA Tournament, tradition-rich Western Kentucky will feature a reconfigured roster in a reconfigured Conference USA under a new head coach this season.

And Steve Lutz, fresh off back-to-back appearances in the Big Dance with Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, said to a media day contingent on Friday afternoon that he likes what he's seen thus far from the new-look Hilltoppers.

"I like our talent," said Lutz, succeeding Rick Stansbury, who resigned after seven seasons at the helm following a disappointing 17-16 campaign in 2022-23. "I think we have enough talent to get where we want to go. I've coached long enough to feel confident that we have the talent to help us win the league, or be in the hunt to win the league, and go to the NCAA Tournament.

"Of course, nobody knows how good anybody is in the league at this point, but I like all of our players."



Earlier this month, WKU was picked to finish third in the nine-team C-USA, behind Liberty and Middle Tennessee, who tied for the top spot in the preseason poll. Two Hilltopper seniors, Dontaie Allen, who originally played for Kentucky, and Brandon Newman, an incoming transfer from Purdue, were selected to the All-C-USA preseason team.

"We're coming together well," said Newman, a 6-foot-5 guard who averaged six points, three rebounds, and one assist per game for the Boilermakers last season.

“I played for coach Lutz at Purdue (then an assistant for Matt Painter) and I then saw the success he had (at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi), building that team on the fly and going to the (NCAA) tournament two years in a row, so I had all the confidence in the world in choosing to come to Western Kentucky.”

Allen and Newman are just two of many pieces to the WKU puzzle.

“We’re fairly simple in what we do and how we do it,” Lutz said. “I want to play motion offense and you have to have guys who can shoot, pass and dribble the ball to be effective. I want to have interchangeable parts as we go. In my mind, it doesn’t matter if you start the game, it matters if you finish it.

“We’re going to work hard every day, we’re going to play the game the right way, and we’re going to put an emphasis on not beating ourselves,” he said. “We are incorporating selfless play — we want to be selfless and tough, and if we play this way we’re going to be fine.”

Western also has the potential to score inside and out, thanks to the presence of Rodney Howard, a 6-11, 250-pound transfer from Georgia Tech, who has reportedly been a bright spot in the preseason.

“I bring physicality to this team.” said Howard, a graduate senior who averaged 4.3 points, 4.5 rebounds, and shot 55% last season for the Yellow Jackets. “Coach Lutz has given me a lot of confidence that I can score around the rim and be very productive for this team. For me, it’s about playing to contact, rebounding, getting the job done on the inside.

“From what I’ve seen so far, this has the potential to be a great (perimeter) shooting team, so if I get doubled down low I have the confidence to kick it our front and believe that these guys are going to put the ball in the hole,” Howard said.

Returning guard Khristian Lander, who originally played at Indiana, likes what he has seen from his new head coach, as well as the new version of the Hilltoppers.

“Coach Lutz is a super-detailed coach, who recruits good players and puts a heavy emphasis on defense — more than any other coach I’ve had,” said Lander, who hit 39% from 3-point range for WKU last season.

“It’s all good vibes here. We all get along really well and the chemistry’s clicking a lot faster than it did with last year’s team — we’re playing together quicker,” Lander said.

Lutz, meanwhile, believes Hilltopper Nation — thirsting desperately for a drink of NCAA Tournament waters — will relish his team’s style of play.

“We want the fans to enjoy the way we play and appreciate the way we play,” said Lutz, whose first WKU team opens regular season play Nov. 6 against visiting Kentucky Wesleyan. “We’re going to have a post presence, we’ll have players who can shoot the ball, and we’ll have players who can drive the ball, so as we evolve as a team I believe people across the country are going to enjoy watching us play.

“We’re working very hard to be the best team we can be — we’re at Wichita State, a very tough place to play, for our second game (Nov. 9), so we’ve got to jump off the diving board and be ready to roll,” Lutz said.

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