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A big week beckons for the Hilltoppers

BY JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer
Feb 1, 2024

One of the most important weeks of the 2023-24 season beckons for the Western Kentucky basketball program, and first-year head coach Steve Lutz is hoping the Hilltoppers will take full advantage of a pair of golden opportunities in the very friendly confines of E.A. Diddle Arena.

On Thursday, WKU (14-6, 3-3 CUSA) plays host to Conference USA co-leader Sam Houston State (12-9, 5-1 CUSA), and the Tops will have revenge on their minds — having dropped a ragged 78-74 decision to the upstart Bearkats on Jan. 10 in Huntsville, Texas.

Then, on Saturday, 'Hundred Miles of Hate' rival Middle Tennessee (8-13, 2-4 CUSA) — the preseason conference co-favorite with Liberty — will come calling with hopes of transforming a disappointing campaign in one fell swoop with a road upset of the Hilltoppers.

The good news is that Western is 9-0 in Diddle this season, and the fact is the Hilltoppers must pull off a clean sweep this week if they have any chance of winning the regular season conference championship.

"This is a big week for us in a lot of ways, and we need to make the most of it," Lutz said. "Sam Houston beat us at their place and we need to approach this game with a better sense of urgency. We better have our hard hats on Thursday because Sam Houston out-toughed us at their place.

"In the first matchup, they beat us at our own game — they outrebounded us, they turned us over, and they got to the free-throw line. We missed 16 or 17 layups in that game and had a lot of self-inflicted wounds — we have to be ready to play.

"They're in first place and we're not, and obviously our goal is to be in first place — it starts with beating them on Thursday."

More good news for WKU is that senior guard Khristian Lander, who missed the the team's last two games due to concussion protocol, is likely to return to action on Thursday.

"I would like to think that Khristian is going to play," Lutz said of Lander, who averages 10.1 points per game and shoots 37% from 3-point range. "Barring any more setbacks, Khristian will be back for the game Thursday and moving forward."

The Hilltoppers are coming off a wild 105-91 home conquest of Florida International last Thursday night. Senior shooting guard Dontaie Allen had a breakthrough game in that one, finishing with a career-high 30 points on 9-of-11 floor shooting, which included 5-of-7 accuracy from long distance, and a 7-of-7 performance from the foul stripe.

The high-scoring affair versus FIU was indicative of the up-and-down-the-court nature of this year's Topper team, which entered the week No. 1 in the NCAA in adjusted tempo — a potential double-edged sword, according to Lutz.

"We've got to learn how to shift from fourth gear to second gear when the game situation calls for it," Lutz said. "We've got to learn to do that better because there have been times when not doing that has hurt us at the end of games. You have to play the game the right way and do what you need to do at the end to win the game.

"I do think this team is geared to play with more possessions — we just need to make good decisions when we have the lead late, and that's something we haven't always done this season."

Turnovers are another issue — the Hilltoppers survived 20 of them in the win over FIU.

"I've been complaining for a month that we're turning the ball over too much," Lutz said. "We've got to get to the point where we make the right play, the tough play, as opposed to making the easy play. We have to do a better job of protecting the basketball, a better job of valuing offensive possessions."

Saturday will also be special because the university will be honoring two of the best-ever Hilltopper teams — the 1965-66 and 1966-67 outfits. Western's 1966 team finished 25-3 and was ranked No. 10 in the nation, and the 1967 team went 23-3 and was ranked No. 6 in the final Associated Press poll. Both teams are being inducted into the WKU Athletics Hall of Fame.

“We’re very excited to welcome members of two great Western Kentucky teams back to Diddle Arena,” Lutz said. “There are people I’ve talked to who believe these were the two best teams in program history — Clem Haskins will be back, Wayne Chapman will be back, and many more ...”

A big week beckons for the Hilltoppers — a very big week, indeed.

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