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WKU FOOTBALL

## Hilltoppers searching for big plays in passing game

WKU has hit just 3 passes of at least 30 yards

BRAD STEPHENS [bstephens@bgdailynews.com](mailto:bstephens@bgdailynews.com) 8 hrs ago

WKU Hilltoppers wide receiver Cameron Echols-Luper (23) runs the ball up the middle October 7, 2017; El Paso Texas at Sun Bowl Stadium. (Steve Roberts/WKU Athletics)

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STEVE ROBERTS/WKU Athletics

Mike Sanford says Western Kentucky took seven deep shots Saturday in a 15-14 win at Texas-El Paso. The Hilltoppers connected on only one.

The inability to hit big plays downfield not only limited WKU's passing numbers, the Toppers' coach said Monday. He observed that the Miners reacted to WKU's struggles through the air by putting defenders near the line of scrimmage and making it harder to run the ball.

That added up to a long night for the Hilltopper offense. WKU (3-2 overall, 1-1 Conference USA) escaped El Paso, Texas, with a one-point win thanks largely to their defense and three missed field goals from UTEP kicker Brady Viles.

Sanford has put an emphasis on hitting big passing plays which, in turn, he thinks will lead to less resistance on the ground.

His team will get a chance to show improvement in that area at 3:30 p.m. Saturday when it hosts Charlotte (0-6, 0-2) in a game streamed on Flofootball.com.

“If we can’t win on the perimeter, we’re going to find the guys that are going to win on the perimeter for us,” Sanford said Monday at the Tops’ weekly news luncheon. “We’re going to practice that way, and it’s my job to make sure that I put the right guys on the field that are going to make those plays.

Big passing plays have been a hallmark of WKU football in recent years. Last season, the Hilltoppers hit an FBS-best 47 completions of at least 30 yards over their 14 games.

WKU has gone from the nation’s best in that category to nearly the worst.

The Toppers are tied with nine other programs at No. 121 nationally with just three pass completions of 30 yards or more. Only Army – an option team that’s attempted an FBS-low 33 passes this season – has recorded fewer 30-plus-yard completions (one) than WKU’s three.

Sanford is encouraging internal competition to find receivers that will make plays either by hauling in long throws from quarterback Mike White or by running for yards after the catch on shorter completions.

WKU’s weekly depth chart released Monday included two starting receiver positions up for grabs. There are prospective battles for playing time between Nacarius Fant and Kylan Towner in the slot and between Cameron Echols-Luper and Xavier Lane at one of the two outside receiver positions opposite Lucky Jackson.

Fant, Jackson and Lane all started at UTEP. The redshirt sophomore Jackson (23 receptions, 13.4 yards per catch, 61.8 receiving yards per game, one touchdown) has been White's most productive target so far this season.

"Lucky has been in the starring role," Sanford said. "He's been a one in that position and Lucky has made some plays, he certainly has, but he's got to make more. He's capable of making more and we've got to make sure we get that out of him."

The graduate senior Echols-Luper has four catches and averages both 13.8 yards per reception and game. The Arkansas State transfer caught a TD pass Saturday from White, but it was nullified by a procedural penalty on tight end Mik'Quan Deane.

"The guy that to me ... has made plays in limited opportunities is Cam Echols-Luper," Sanford said. "Cam's got to play more. When Cam's had an opportunity to play, he's done a great job."

Sanford praised the redshirt freshman Lane for improving "week after week after week." He's caught 16 passes this season, averaging 12 ypc and 48 ypg.

The coach touched on what he sees as a need to get the ball to the redshirt junior Towner. The explosive kickoff return man has two catches this year for just nine yards.

The senior Fant leads WKU in total receptions with 24. The Bowling Green native averages 9.2 ypc and 44 ypg.

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“Towner’s a guy that’s too dynamic not to play more at our slot position,” Sanford said.

“He’s got to play.

“Nacarius has done some very good things, but Kylan hasn’t been on the field very much. That’s on me as a coach to get one of our faster, more dynamic players on the field.”

The hope for Sanford is that bigger passing plays will in turn make the rushing attack less of a slog. Defenses would then have to respect the pass and leave safeties further off the line of scrimmage, creating more space on rushing plays.

Defenses stacking defenders in the box to stop the run has been a contributing factor to the Tops’ anemic rushing figures so far. WKU ranks No. 129 nationally in rushing yards per game (74.6) and No. 130 – dead last – in yards per carry (2.33).

The Hilltoppers and Georgia State are the only FBS teams without a carry of at least 20 yards.

Jakairi Moses (50 yards on 19 carries) was the Hilltoppers’ leading rusher against the Miners. The freshman’s 41.7 rushing yards per game lead WKU’s running backs, followed by Quinton Baker (30.7), D’Andre Ferby (28.7) and Marquez Trigg (27.4).

Moses didn’t take any of his 19 carries Saturday for 10 yards or more. The longest of his rushing attempts went for nine yards.

“They stack the box to defend me,” the Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., native Moses said Monday. “There’s really nothing you can do about it.”

Hitting big passing plays downfield would alleviate that congestion near the line of scrimmage, Sanford said.

“Playmakers have to make plays in critical parts of games and it really does allow us to open up the playbook when we do hit our shots down the field,” Sanford said. “It allows us to be more effective in the run game. We’ve got to make plays.”

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## Brad Stephens

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