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a publication of college heights herald sports



2011-2012 Basketball Season Preview

TOPPER

extra

Your source for WKU sports - November 11, 2011

This season's Toppers a young, defensive-minded team

By COLE CLAYBOURN
sports@wkuherald.com

The first thing many people might notice about this year's version of the Toppers is their youth.

But freshman guard Derrick Gordon hopes that's not the only thing that sticks out.

"We're defensive-minded," Gordon said. "That's what's going to win us a lot of games."

This year's team features nine newcomers — seven freshmen and two junior college transfers.

On top of that, the Toppers will have to replace 66 percent of their scoring from last year's team. The team's leading returning scorers, lone senior guard Kahlil McDonald and junior guard Caden Dickerson, averaged just 6.7 and 6.0 points per game respectively last season.

So to offset what the team lost offensively, McDonald said the team has to focus on shutting other teams down.

"Defense is going to bring offense," he said. "We play D, it makes the offense easier. We're going to play hard and it's going to

trickle right down the line."

Head Coach Ken McDonald started three freshmen — Gordon, forward George Fant and guard T.J. Price — in WKU's 73-61 exhibition win over Xavier (La.) last Saturday.

Gordon led all scorers with 17 while Price finished with 12 points and freshman forward Nigel Snipes with 11.



DERRICK GORDON
FRESHMAN GUARD

Kahlil McDonald added 11 points. When asked who the team's main scorer would be this year, Ken McDonald jokingly replied, "Orlando Mendez-Valdez," the former Topper who now plays professionally in Mexico.

But he's said all along that in order to win, it will take

a balanced scoring effort this season given the production that left last season.

"If everyone can contribute, I think everyone's going to be happy," Ken McDonald said. "There's different ways for guys to contribute — some might be scoring, some might be rebounding, some might be a defensive presence."

"That's something that will obviously will evolve with time as well and you have to sell those rolls."



GEORGE FANT
FRESHMAN FORWARD

Naturally, with so many newcomers, a few jitters could be expected Friday night in WKU's first game against St. Joseph's at 7 p.m. at Diddle Arena.

Gordon and Snipes said they felt them in Saturday's exhibition, but Friday night could be a different story in their first official game.

Ken McDonald said the young players will have to grow up fast because they'll be

counted on to contribute as much as anyone.

"We're going to throw these guys in the fire and everybody knows it," he said. "Everyone knows they're going to play. I want our team to have a reputation of just a long line of WKU players that are coming at you and contributing."

After Friday night's game, WKU will turn back around on Monday for another home game against Tennessee State.

The Toppers will then turn their focus to the Charleston Classic in Charleston, S.C.

After a first round matchup with Tulsa on Thursday, the Toppers could potentially face Louisiana State, Northwestern and Georgia Tech.

They could also potentially play St. Joseph's or Virginia Commonwealth — both of which are on WKU's regular season schedule.

"We're going to go after that tournament with expectations of going in there one game at a time," Ken McDonald said. "But that's an opportunity early in the season to win a championship and that's what we're going to talk about and go in with the expectations of."

Upperclassmen ready to teach newcomers

By COLE CLAYBOURN
sports@wkuherald.com

Head Coach Ken McDonald hasn't been shy about the fact that it might take a little while for his newcomers to get acquainted to the college game.

With four upperclassmen returning from last year's team — senior guard Kahlil McDonald, junior guards Caden Dickerson, Jamal Crook and redshirt junior center Teeng Akol — he said he's

hoping that transition will be a little easier on them.

"I think the veteran leadership is really important," Ken McDonald said. "I think there are guys who have put it in the book a little bit — guys that have college experience at this level. That's going to be the starting point."

Whether it's the upperclassmen who do it or the younger players, Ken McDonald said the scoring void that the departed players left will need to be filled.

But he said he's confident that will happen because he sees this year's team as a "much more skilled group than a year ago."

"We got to help each other score. That's how we're really talking to the guys and working on the offense and moving the ball," he said. "A lot better passers than a year ago. I think our offense is going to flow better in that regard, in terms of what you saw a year ago."

Even with the lack of experience with this year's team and a projected finish of third in the Sun Belt Conference's East Division, the goals haven't changed by any means from last year's when they were picked to finish first.

Crook said the team actually prefers it that way.

"We love it," he said. "We don't want to be in that spotlight. We're the underdogs right now. We're embracing that and we're loving it, so we just want to come out and give the teams what we got."

Because it's still early in the season, there are still some things the team has to work out, such as fatigue, Kahlil McDonald said.

But long term, the senior said he'd like nothing more than to play in the postseason.

"We want to achieve that goal of winning the Sun Belt Conference and getting to the NCAA Tournament," he said. "That's pretty much the ultimate goal right now. From there, the sky's the limit."

Although he's been hurt early on during the preseason with a grade two medial collateral sprain, Kahlil McDonald said it's been fun to assume that role so far.

"I'm embracing that leadership role right now," he said. "Just trying to bring this team together and go hard and come into this incoming season."



KAHLIL MCDONALD
SENIOR GUARD



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Men's Basketball 2011-2012 Schedule

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| ■ Nov. 11 vs. St. Joseph's 7 p.m. | ■ Dec. 10 at IUPUI 6 p.m. | ■ Feb. 4 vs. South Alabama 7 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 14 vs. Tennessee St. 7 p.m. | ■ Dec. 17 vs. Furman 7 p.m. | ■ Feb. 9 at Middle Tennessee 7 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 17 vs. Tulsa (Charleston Classic) 11:30 a.m. | ■ Dec. 23 at Louisville 6 p.m. | ■ Feb. 11 at Troy 1 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 18 TBD (Charleston Classic) TBD | ■ Dec. 29 at Louisiana-Monroe 7:30 p.m. | ■ Feb. 16 vs. Florida Atlantic 7 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 20 TBD (Charleston Classic) TBD | ■ Dec. 31 vs. Florida International 1 p.m. | ■ Feb. 18 at South Alabama 7:05 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 23 vs. VCU 7 p.m. | ■ Jan. 5 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette 7 p.m. | ■ Feb. 23 vs. Arkansas State 7 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 26 vs. Southeastern La. 7 p.m. | ■ Jan. 7 vs. Troy 4 p.m. | ■ Feb. 25 vs. Middle Tennessee 5 p.m. |
| ■ Dec. 1 vs. Murray State 7 p.m. | ■ Jan. 12 at North Texas 7 p.m. | ■ March 3-6 Sun Belt Conference Tournament (Hot Springs, Ark.) |
| ■ Dec. 4 vs. Bowling Green St. 2 p.m. | ■ Jan. 15 at Denver 2 p.m. | |
| ■ Dec. 7 at Southern Illinois 7:05 p.m. | ■ Jan. 21 vs. UALR 1 p.m. | |
| | ■ Jan. 26 at Florida Atlantic 6 p.m. | |
| | ■ Jan. 28 at Florida International 6:30 p.m. | |

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Preseason Sun Belt Conference Men's Basketball Poll

As voted by Sun Belt head coaches
First-place votes in parentheses

West Division



1 **Arkansas State (8)** — The Red Wolves posted back-to-back seasons of double-digit league wins for the first time since the early 1990s. They'll turn to their Preseason All-Sun Belt Conference First Team selection, senior forward Martavius Adams, to continue that streak.



2 **Louisiana-Lafayette (2)** — Coach Bob Marlin saw plenty of success in his first year as the Ragin' Cajuns head coach, ending the 2010-11 regular season on an 11-game win streak. However, they have to replace six letter winners and two starters from last year's team.



3 **North Texas (1)** — Despite Coach Johnny Jones leading the Mean Green to five straight 20-plus win campaigns, he will face the challenge of replacing four starters including leading scorer and First Team All-Sun Belt Conference guard Tristan Thompson.



4 **Denver (1)** — The Pioneers hope to have experience as their advantage as they return four starters, five seniors and 86 percent of their scoring offense from last year.



5 **UALR** — Though the Trojans return three starters from last year's Sun Belt Conference Championship and NCAA Tournament team, they lose Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year Solomon Bozeman to graduation.



6 **Louisiana-Monroe** — The Warhawks will look to rebound from a 7-24 season and will turn to seniors Fred Brown and Hugh Mingo to move the team up in the West Division standings.

East Division



1 **Florida Atlantic (11)** — Last year's Sun Belt Conference Coach of the Year Mike Jarvis and his team come in to the season as the near-unanimous East Division favorite. FAU boasts two Preseason All-Sun Belt Conference First Team selections — juniors Raymond Taylor and Greg Gantt.



2 **Middle Tennessee (1)** — Coach Kermit Davis enters his 10th season as the Blue Raider's head coach, ranking second all-time in coaching wins at MTSU with 153 during his tenure.



3 **WKU** — The Toppers will be looking toward their highly touted recruiting class to replace 66 percent of their scoring from last season after losing All-Sun Belt Conference First Team selections Sergio Kerusch and Steffphon Pettigrew.



4 **South Alabama** — Though the Jaguars return last year's Sun Belt Conference Freshman of the Year and this year's Preseason Player of the Year Augustine Rubit, they are without four of their starters from a year ago.



5 **FIU** — The NCAA listed the Panthers in the top 14 percent for "Most Improved Teams in 2011." They'll look for senior guard DeJuan Wright to help continue moving the program in the right direction.



6 **Troy** — The Trojans return only three letter winners from last year's team and will lean heavily on nine newcomers to find success this season.

Preseason Sun Belt Conference Women's Basketball Poll

As voted by Sun Belt head coaches
First-place votes in parentheses

West Division



1 **Denver (6)** — With the loss of three seniors and a large percentage of its scorers, the Pioneers return with Kaetlyn Murdoch, who leads the team in points and was named Sun Belt Conference Pre-season Co-Player of the Year.



2 **Arkansas State (1)** — Senior guard NeNe Hurst returns along with three returning starters and nine newcomers this season after leading the Red Wolves to the Sun Belt Conference semifinals. ASU ended last season at 18-14, 9-7 in the conference.



3 **UALR (3)** — Last year's Sun Belt Conference Tournament champions return this year with Marian Kursh, who earned preseason second team all-conference honors.



4 **Louisiana-Monroe** — Senior center Larrie Williams was a preseason all-Sun Belt second team selection. She started all 31 games last season and averaged 11.3 points per game.



5 **North Texas (1)** — Returning starters Jasmine Godbolt, who was named Sun Belt Freshman of the Year two seasons ago, and Kasondra Foreman will be the Mean Green's top scoring threats.



6 **Louisiana-Lafayette (1)** — The Ragin' Cajuns have lost three starters from last year's team, but leading scorer Mercedes Johnson and leading shot blocker Kemi Rotibi return for this season.

East Division



1 **Middle Tennessee (9)** — The Lady Raiders return sophomore forward Ebony Rowe, who earned a spot on last season's All-Sun Belt First team.



2 **FIU (2)** — The Panthers finished second in the East Division and third overall last season. Sophomore guard Jerica Coley is one of three double-digit scorers returning from last season.



3 **WKU (1)** — Head Coach Mary Taylor Cowles hopes a combination of five seniors and seven freshmen will take a Lady Topper program which has qualified for three Final Fours back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2008.



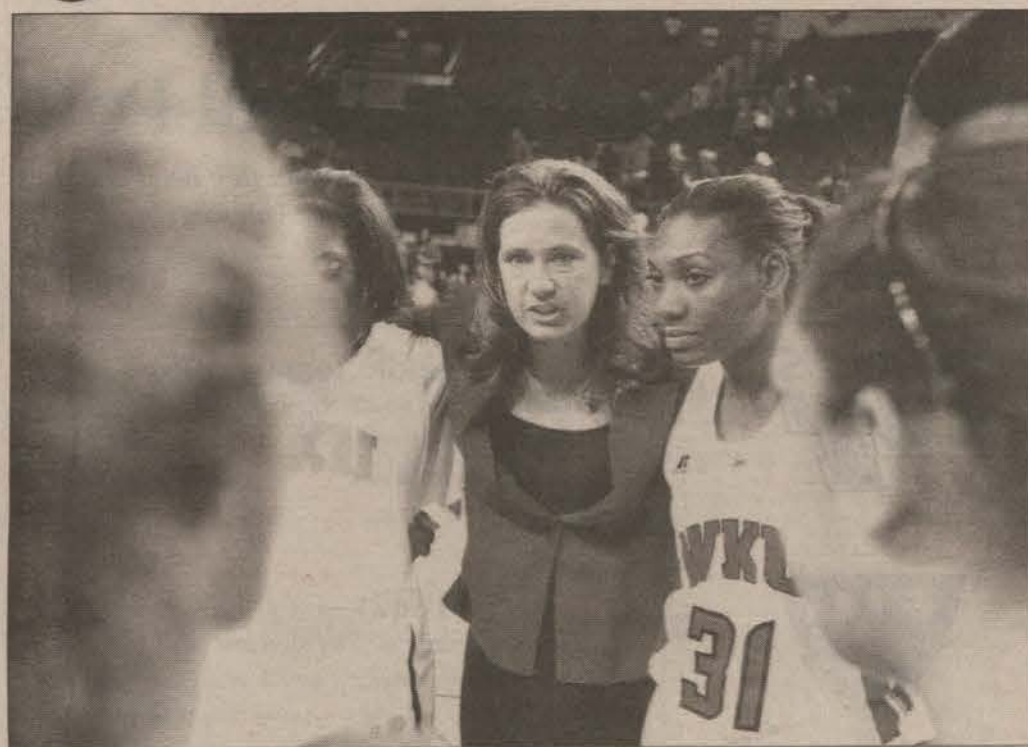
4 **South Alabama** — Senior guard Sarda Peterson was named to the Preseason All-Sun Belt Third team. Coach Rick Pietri is faced with replacing three-year point guard Siediah Banks, who also led the team in assists.



5 **Florida Atlantic (1)** — The Lady Owls return this year with just one newcomer and four returning starters. Senior guard Breana Turner was named to the Preseason All-Sun Belt Third Team.



6 **Troy** — The Trojans return with two seniors, a junior and two previous starters who were redshirted due to injuries. DeAngela Sword was named to the Preseason All-Sun Belt Third team.



Head coach Mary Taylor Cowles will look to her five seniors to help guide the Lady Toppers back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2008. Senior forward LaTeira Owens (No. 31) is WKU's top returning scorer after averaging 10.4 points per game as a junior last season.

Cowles hopes young, old take WKU back to NCAA tournament

By BRAD STEPHENS
sports@wkuherald.com

There's a contrast of old and new with this season's Lady Toppers.

On the old side are experienced players LaTeira Owens and Vanessa Obafemi, two of WKU's five seniors.

On the new are former Texas Class 4A high school Player of the Year Summer Fife, three-time Arizona Girls Basketball Player of the Year Ileana Johnson and five other Lady Topper freshmen.

"It's pretty unique, the combination of veterans and experience with non-experience," said Head Coach Mary Taylor Cowles, entering her 10th season as WKU's coach.

Cowles will be hoping the combination of senior leadership and freshman enthusiasm will take the Lady Toppers back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2008.

WKU didn't qualify for postseason play at all one season ago, going 15-17 before losing to Arkansas-Little Rock in the Sun Belt Conference Championship game.

According to the Sun Belt coaches' pre-season predictions, the Lady Toppers will be staying home once again this March.

League coaches picked WKU to finish third in the East Division behind Middle Tennessee State and Florida International. Owens said she doesn't mind others having low expectations of the Lady Toppers this year.

"We have a lot to prove because a lot of people count us out," she said. "It feels good to be underdogs because any night we could come out and show them that we should've been picked No. 1."

Cowles said she's been pleased with the way her seniors have taken initiative in both directing all the freshmen and trying to surpass the league's modest expectations.

"They've all understood that it's their

senior year and they need to step up, and they've done that," she said. "It's come together extremely strong for us."

Johnson agreed with Cowles, saying the patience of the more experienced Lady Toppers has eased the transition of the WKU freshmen into the college game.

"It's been a lot of learning, and the seniors have been there kind of holding our hands through it," Johnson said.

All of the freshmen got playing time last Sunday in the Lady Toppers' 84-59 win over Kentucky Wesleyan.

Guard Alexis Govan made the biggest impression of the newcomers, notching eight points, three rebounds, three assists and a block.

Saturday's game against Towson will give WKU fans the chance to see Govan and the rest of the freshman class in their first ever regular season game.

Tipoff between the Lady Toppers and Tigers is set for 4 p.m. in Diddle Arena.

Cowles said that after playing against each other every day since Oct. 3, her players are ready to see some new competition.

She said WKU's toughest test will be containing Towson point guard Krystal Parnell, who averaged 10.5 points per game and dished out 134 assists one year ago.

"For us it's just the principles of our defense, whether it's in the half-court, whether it's extending the defense," Cowles said. "Communication's going to be a big key for us, especially out on the perimeter."

She said much of the team's focus this week has been in setting up a game plan specific to the Tigers.

But Cowles said there's still work to be done in getting her own team ready for the upcoming year.

"I am concerned about us, I'll be real honest with you," she said. "But we've got to prepare too."

Owens becoming vocal leader for Lady Toppers

By BRAD STEPHENS
sports@wkuherald.com

LaTeira Owens had a long talk with her coach last spring after the season.

The forward, who averaged 10.4 points per game as a junior, would be WKU's top returning scorer for the 2011-12 season.

Head Coach Mary Taylor Cowles said she wanted Owens to be the type of leader she needed to take the Lady Toppers back to the post-season.

"We spent a lot of time talking about her and her abilities and our expectations for her coming into her senior year," Cowles said. "Her senior season means a lot to this young lady."

Owens was selected in October to the All-Sun Belt Conference second-team, the only WKU player to make any of the league's three preseason teams.

Her shooting and rebounding skills have made her the Lady Toppers' best offensive player, as evidenced by her performance in WKU's 84-59 win over Kentucky Wesleyan last Sunday.

Owens led the Lady Toppers with 26 points and 11 rebounds, going 8-of-13 from the field and 10-of-11 from the free throw line.

But instead of just leading with the numbers she was putting up, Owens said she's made a more concerted effort to be heard on the court.

"The main thing is to be more vocal, because last year I wasn't vocal on the court," she said. "I didn't know how to do that... Now I have that leader role."

Cowles said her five seniors have each taken coaching and teaching roles in getting WKU's

seven freshmen ready for their first taste of college play.

She said Owens is the kind of player who "calls it like she sees it."

"LaTeira's always been very vocal," Cowles said. "She's quick to compliment a teammate, and she can be quick to call a teammate out because that's how she is. I think you need that."

She contrasted Owens' communication with that of senior forward Jasmine Johnson, who she said "may be the first one to go put her arm around somebody."

"They blend together so well as a group of seniors that I think that's been a tremendous impact on our freshmen," Cowles said.

Owens and frontline partner, senior Keisha Mosley, handled the Panthers almost by themselves in the exhibition win.

Owens driving and attacking game was complemented by Mosley's 20 points and 9-of-12 shooting in the low post.

"We have a good post game, and that's what we rely on," Owens said. "We rely on our post game because it will open up scoring and drives for our guards."

Owens' talents both scoring and rebounding from the forward position have caused expectations to be higher this season for her than for any other Lady Topper.

But Cowles said the entire senior class, not just Owens, will have to play well if WKU is to be NCAA-bound in March.

"Do I think a lot's expected from LaTeira? Of course I do," Cowles said. "But I think a lot's expected from our seniors altogether, and I'm talking about production on the basketball floor."

SPORTS BRIEF

Jones, McClain ink with WKU women

Two members of Head Coach Mary Taylor Cowles' 2012 recruiting class have officially signed.

Forward Jalynn McClain, of Jeffersonville, Ind., and Green County guard Micah Jones both submitted their letters of intent to Cowles on Wednesday.

Both players have dealt or are dealing with rehab from anterior cruciate ligament tears.

McClain suffered a torn ACL in June, one season after averaging 15.6 points and six rebounds per game in helping Jeffersonville win

the Indiana Class 4A state championship.

Meanwhile Jones sat out her junior year with an ACL tear, coming off a sophomore season in which she led Green County with 15.2 points per game.

Cowles said her staff "never batted an eye" on rethinking Jones' recruitment after the injury.

"I didn't want her to worry about the recruiting process so that she could focus on getting her knee, her body and getting herself mentally and physically ready to go," Cowles said.

— Brad Stephens

Women's Basketball 2011-2012 Schedule

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| ■ Nov. 12 vs. Towson 4 p.m. | ■ Dec. 9 at Illinois State 7 p.m. | ■ Jan. 28 at Florida International 4:30 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 15 at Northwestern 7 p.m. | ■ Dec. 11 vs. Florida International 2 p.m. | ■ Feb. 4 vs. South Alabama 4 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 20 vs. Duke 2 p.m. | ■ Dec. 21 at Texas Tech 7 p.m. | ■ Feb. 8 at Middle Tennessee State TBA. |
| ■ Nov. 22 vs. Wright State 7 p.m. | ■ Dec. 29 at Louisiana-Monroe 5:30 p.m. | ■ Feb. 11 at Troy 4 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 25 vs. Samford (UAB/Samford Classic) 3:30 p.m. | ■ Jan. 4 vs. Louisiana-Lafayette 11 a.m. | ■ Feb. 15 vs. Florida Atlantic 7:30 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 26 at UAB (UAB/Samford Classic) 4:30 p.m. | ■ Jan. 7 vs. Troy 1 p.m. | ■ Feb. 18 at South Alabama 5 p.m. |
| ■ Nov. 29 at Bowling Green 6 p.m. | ■ Jan. 11 at North Texas 7 p.m. | ■ Feb. 22 Arkansas State 7:30 p.m. |
| ■ Dec. 5 vs. Louisiana Tech 7 p.m. | ■ Jan. 15 at Denver 4:30 p.m. | ■ Feb. 26 Middle Tennessee State 1 p.m. |
| ■ Dec. 7 at Tennessee Tech 5:30 p.m. | ■ Jan. 17 vs. Tennessee Tech 7 p.m. | ■ March 3-6 Sun Belt Conference Tournament (Hot Springs, Ark.) |
| | ■ Jan. 22 vs. Arkansas-Little Rock 2 p.m. | |
| | ■ Jan. 25 at Florida Atlantic 6 p.m. | |

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