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Lady Toppers face familiar, dangerous scenario at MTSU

By ERIC WOEHLER
The Daily News

The Lady Toppers will be underdogs.

But today, they will have to face Middle Tennessee State at 7 p.m., it's a familiar story for Western Kentucky University's women's basketball team: another non-conference game, another chance to make somebody else's season.

The Lady Toppers are 7-3 and ranked 19th in the country after 10 games, each against teams ranked 10th in the nation. Western was expected to beat Middle Tennessee State (8-3) is the 11th such foe.

North Carolina State and Tennessee Tech both entered The Associated Press Top 25 following December upsets of Western. Since beating the Lady Tops, though, the Wolfpack has lost four of six. Tech has dropped four of seven decisions since its upset of Western.

The burden of being favored is one Coach Paul Sanderford said his team will not mind shedding when it visits Vanderbilt, the country's No. 1 ranked team, on Feb. 4.

"I hope Vandy wins every game between now and then and stays at No. 1," he said.

In the meantime, Western has six games — four in the Sun Belt Conference — "and we need to get excited about competing," Sanderford said.

Actually, he is not terribly worried his players are looking ahead to Vanderbilt.

"That game is still too far away," Sanderford said. "But I've heard the Kentucky game (Tuesday in Lexington) mentioned two or three times. But we've got two big games before then: MTSU on Friday and Southeastern Louisiana on Sunday. It's like an NBA schedule right now."

Middle Tennessee State lost to Tennessee State by six on Wednesday, "and it was their worst game of the year. They're a good team. They execute their offense very well."

The Lady Raiders are tiny. They don't start a center or any player taller than 5-foot-10.

Priscilla Robinson, a 5-foot-10 junior guard, was the Ohio Valley Conference's player of the year last season. She's averaging 13.9 points and 5.6 rebounds a game.

Heather Prater, a 5-foot-8 guard, has started every game of her freshman season. She averages a team-high 6.2 assists and chips in 10.3 points.

Robinson and Prater are the two biggest 3-pointer threats on a 3-point shooting team. MTSU hits better than six 3s a game. Robinson shoots 57 percent from long range; Prater hits 56 percent of her tries.

Forwards Cherrita Williams and Michelle Jackson and guard Julie Morrison complete Coach Lewis Bivins' starting five.

Sanderford will probably counter with his tallest players inside: 6-foot-3 senior Trina Wilson at power forward and 6-foot-4 senior Paulette Monroe at center. Forward Ida Bowen and guards Renee Westmoreland and Dawn Warner are the other probable starters.

The flu has apparently completed its run through Western's roster. In fact, sophomore reserve center Lori Abell is the only Lady Topper hampered by injury, Sanderford said. Her left arm is in a sling, but he said the forearm injury is apparently not serious.

"We're working harder, and we're getting healthier," Sanderford said. "We're still not playing very well. But we'll just try to do things right fundamentally."
Sports beat

WKU's Cook makes Junior Select team

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Western Kentucky University basketball player Veronica Cook has been named to the U.S. Junior Select team after four days of tryouts.

"Cook, who will be a sophomore for Coach Paul Sanderford's team next fall, is a Franklin-Simpson High graduate and the Lady Toppers' freshman of the year."

She started 12 games for Western as a freshman and averaged 5 points and 3.2 rebounds.

"That's a pretty big honor," Sanderford said of Cook's selection. Thirty-four athletes — freshmen and sophomores — tried out for two teams.
Lady Tops win battle for Heikkila but lose prep center to Purdue

By ERIC WOEHNER 11-12-92
The Daily News

Paul Sanderford has no question about the effect Jaana Heikkila will have on his program. He's a bit worried about his effect on her.

"I guess she'll pick up my North Carolina drawl," Western Kentucky University's women's basketball coach said. "Her mom's an English teacher, though. Maybe she can correct the slang."

Heikkila, a 5-foot-10 guard from Espoo, Finland, signed a national letter-of-intent Wednesday to play for the Lady Toppers next fall after also considering the University of Kentucky. She is the second recruit to choose Western over UK, following Russellville High School's Stacie Gamble.

Western, meanwhile, lost the recruiting battle for 6-foot center Leslie Johnson of Fort Wayne, Ind., who announced today she signed with Purdue.

As for Heikkila, Sanderford said she can play either point or off guard.

"I like her at point because of her size and because she's an outstanding passer," he said. "The key with European players is that they are all such great passers and they move so well without the basketball."

Two years ago, Sanderford watched Heikkila play at summer basketball camps at Kentucky and Tennessee. She took part in Western's camp last summer.

Though Western coaches have seen Heikkila in action less than other recruits, Sanderford said the new signee is not an unknown commodity.

"It doesn't take a genius to see her skills and know what she could do for this basketball team," he said.

"The Finnish National Team, of which Heikkila, 18, is a member, will play exhibitions at Michigan, Michigan State, Dayton and Toledo."

"But she probably won't get to play much because she is the youngest player by far on that team," Sanderford said. "This is the No. 1 team in the country."

The loss of Johnson makes the spring signing period all the more significant for Western.

"We've got to have a post. We graduate Trina Wilson, Debbie Scott and Paulette Monroe, so spring becomes really important for us," Sanderford said. "We're going to be looking for a true center, and we're on the trail of a couple."

Johnson chose Purdue from a short list that also included Western and Louisiana Tech.

Odds and ends

= Brandi Ashby, a 6-foot-2 Webster County High School forward who orally committed to Western on Sunday, is expected to sign Friday, her mother's birthday.

Gamble, meanwhile, brings family ties to the "Hill. She's a distant cousin to Lillie Mason, the Lady Toppers' all-time leading scorer and a 1986 Kodak All-American.

The Southeastern and Big Ten conferences are widely regarded as women's college basketball's best leagues. The November Sun Belt Monthly points out that the conference has five teams with at least 20 games, a feat unmatched by either the SEC or Big Ten.

Gamble signs with Lady Toppers

From Special Dispatches

As expected, Russellville High School basketball standout Stacie Gamble signed a national letter-of-intent yesterday to play for the Western Kentucky Lady Toppers.

Gamble, a 5-foot-11 guard-forward, averaged 18 points, five rebounds and three assists for the Panthers, who were 17-7.

"We feel Stacie is one of the best athletes in Kentucky," said Western coach Paul Sanderford, whose team was runner-up to Stanford in last season's NCAA Tournament.

"We have followed her progress since the seventh grade. She has great skills and excellent quickness. ... We'll probably move Stacie to the perimeter to give us that big guard I always (wanted)."

Gamble is a distant cousin of Lillie Mason, the Lady Toppers' all-time scoring leader and a 1986 Kodak All-American.

A Western publicist said at least two more recruits are expected to sign this week, including Webster County's Brandi Ashby, a 6-2 center-forward. Ashby averaged 21 points, 14.5 rebounds and six blocks.

Morehead State: The Lady Eagles signed Jan Seibert, 6-0 from West Hopkins High; Renee Miller, a 6-4 center from Kendallville, Ind.; and Jodi Bitsko, a 6-1 forward-center from Dayton, Ohio.

Seibert averaged 20 points and 10 rebounds last season.

Miller averaged 15 points, 12 rebounds and four blocks as a junior last season at East Noble High School.

Miller has two uncles who played Division I basketball: brothers Tom and Mike Heitz. Tom played at the University of Kentucky, Mike at West Virginia.

"We're in great need of post players," Morehead coach Janet Gabriel said. "Renee has long arms, good hands and a good attitude, and she runs the floor well."

Bitsko averaged 16 points, eight rebounds, five blocks and five assists last season at Carroll High School, which had an 18-3 record.

Bitsko also plays goalie in soccer and is a high jumper.

"Jodi is a definite power forward," Gabriel said. "She is very athletic and will provide us with inside strength, something we're in need of for next season."

Eastern Kentucky: The Lady Colonels signed 6-1 forward Melissa Brown of Russell High School and Lisa Fussell, a 6-0 guard-forward-center from Dickson (Tenn.) High School.

Brown averaged 21.3 points and 8.4 rebounds last season. Fussell scored 15.2 points a game and averaged 10.1 rebounds.
BRANDI ASHBY is pictured here last Friday as she signed a national letter of intent to play basketball at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. According to Paul Sanderford, head coach of the Lady Hilltoppers, Ashby is one of the top recruits signed by Western in recent years. Looking on are Phil Gibson, head coach of the Webster County Lady Trojans and Miss Ashby's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Milton Ashby of Sebree. Miss Ashby begins her final season of basketball at Webster County High School on Monday, November 30.
Battle for the Belt

Techsters, W. Kentucky expect a war

By THOMAS MURPHY
Staff Writer

What's all the fuss in Ruston this week? It's just the locals preparing for today's 7 p.m. Sun Belt Conference showdown between the 10th-ranked Lady Techsters and 18th-ranked Western Kentucky.

It's the biggest conference game for Lady Tech since ... well, maybe ever.

Hype abounds. Tech officials are expecting a huge, boisterous crowd. ESPn will be there, taping the game for delayed replay at noon Wednesday.

Both teams are unbeaten in the Belt. Tech is 17-3 overall, 8-0 in conference play and has won 12 straight games. Western (14-5, 8-0) was the national runner-up last season and has only one loss (to No. 2 Vanderbilt) in its last six games.

"This is a very good matchup," Techsters coach Leon Barmore said.

"If we win the game, our season's not over, and if we lose, our season's not over," Western Kentucky coach Paul Sanderford said. "But for me to say this is not a big ballgame would be ridiculous."

The players are acutely aware of the importance of this matchup, which will be repeated Feb. 28 in Bowling Green, Ky.

Western Kentucky center Paulette Monroe leads the Lady Techsters in scoring with 13.8 points per game.

The point guard battle should be interesting, as well, with WKU's Renee Westmoreland pitted against Tech's Thomas and Nicole Collins.

The Techsters are just now recovering from a flu wave. Vickie Johnson, the leading scorer at 14.0 points per game, was hit hardest.

Western forward Ida Bowen also has the flu bug and is questionable for today's game.

Because it's Tech's home game, it is more crucial for the Techsters than the Toppers. "It's a case where if we want to win the conference, we cannot lose a home game," Barmore said.

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