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Plenty to watch this year in Act II for WKU

BRAD STEPHENS
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM

Talk about setting the bar high.
All coach Ray Harper and WKU did this spring was turn around a 5-14 season, make a run to the Sun Belt Conference Tournament title and notch the Toppers' first NCAA Tournament win since 2009.
It was a run that both re-energized a dormant fan base and quieted critics that disagreed with Harper's promotion from interim head coach to full-time head coach in February.
It also made everyone excited to see what's going to happen this year in Act II of Harper and the Toppers.
It'll be hard for WKU to follow up the drama of this spring, but there will still be plenty of interesting story lines to follow this year.
Here are a few that I'll be watching:

How much will the Toppers miss Derrick Gordon?
Derrick Gordon, the self-proclaimed "Mr. Hilltopper," and Vinny Zollo both transferred from WKU's program soon after the end of last season.
Between the two, Gordon will be the one more missed on the court this season.
He was a high-energy guy who was a bulldog on the defensive end, was explosive cutting to the basket and was an aggressive rebounder from the guard position.
But he had some drawbacks as well—notably a little bit of an ego and a streaky shooting ability.
Some games, Gordon could threaten for a double-double. Other times, he could go 1-of-6 from the three-point line and almost become an offensive liability.
No one player will replace Gordon.

Will any of the new guys make an impact?
This year's newcomers aren't coming to Bowling Green with quite the hype and expectations of last year's George Fant-Gordon-Price group.
It's unlikely that any of this year's new guys (JUCO transfer Harris, scholarship freshmen Eddie Alcantara and Aleksejs Rostov, and walk-on freshman Percy Blade) will become "the guy" right away.
But they could develop into some key role players.
Harris and Rostov both started Monday in WKU's exhibition against Campbellsville, and while neither had an especially remarkable game against the overmatched Tigers, they showed they'd done the work in practice and earned the respect of their coach enough to where they started a game.
Harper has already said he doesn't expect Alcantara, who was slowed by injury throughout the offseason, to be 100 percent until later this year.
And while Blade will develop during his time at WKU, it's unrealistic to think of a freshman walk-on getting lots of playing time this year, barring injury to others.
Outside of Harris, who will likely be either a starter or oft-used bench player, WKU may not rely on newcomers this year as much as in years past.

What's going to happen Dec. 16-22?
The meat of WKU's non-conference schedule lies in three games away from Diddle Arena over a six-day span in December.
First comes a rivalry game on the road Dec. 16 against Murray State, a team that lost just two games all last season.
Two days later, the Toppers will head to Richmond, Va., to play Virginia Commonwealth, a school two years removed from a trip to the Final Four.
Finally, on Dec. 22, WKU will play AP Preseason No. 2 Louisville in Nashville's Bridgestone Arena.
Harper told the Bowling Green Daily News over the summer that playing three games against three quality opponents in three states over a six-day span is "not an ideal situation." That might be an understatement.
If WKU can either win two of those three games—or just beat Louisville—most Topper fans will be happy.
But how WKU does during that stretch—the toughest of its non-conference season—will have a big impact on its at-large NCAA tournament berth possibilities should the Toppers have a good year but fail to win the Sun Belt.

Obviously, there will be a lot more story lines to watch, especially the continued development of senior big man Teeng Akol and the potential of Fant to become one the league's best power forwards.
No matter what happens in 2012-2013, it probably won't match the drama that marked the end of last year.
But with the momentum from last year and potential for bigger things to come, Act II could be just as fun.
Experience could define men's basketball season

It took coach Ray Harper two months to get the Toppers in postseason form last year. This season, he'll have a little more time to get them there.

Harper and the Toppers have one more exhibition game, at home against Kentucky Wesleyan at 7 p.m. on Saturday, before WKU's 2012-2013 regular season begins on Nov. 10.

He took over as interim coach of a 5-11 WKU team on Jan. 6, after then-coach Ken McDonald was released.

On March 6, two months later, the Toppers beat North Texas in the Sun Belt Conference Championship to secure a spot in the NCAA Tournament.

WKU earned a tournament win over Mississippi Valley State before falling to eventual-champion Kentucky.

Despite their late success last year, WKU was picked by Sun Belt coaches to finish third in the league this season.

Senior guard Jamal Crook said the Toppers aren't paying attention to any expectations.

"It doesn't matter if we were last or second-to-last," he said. "We've just got to come in and play basketball and do what we do at the end of the day."

Junior guard Caden Dickerson said the experience the Toppers gained in those two months could help the team go far this season.

"We're experienced, so we've been there and we've done that," Dickerson said. "We know what it takes to get back to where we were last year, and we're just going to take each game one-by-one and take it as an opportunity to get better each night out."

Experience will be key for WKU — with only two seniors (Crook and center Teeng Akol) on the roster, the Toppers will need some younger players to play beyond their years.

One underclassman expected to play a big role for WKU is sophomore forward George Fant, who had 20 points and eight rebounds in the team's first exhibition on Monday against Campbellsville.

Fant said he's seen clear improvement from the Toppers over the offseason in their on-the-court hustle.

"You'll see a hard-playing team every time we go on the court," he said. "You're going to have the fans happy because we're going to dive on loose balls and play physical and do all the little things."

Harper brings winning experience to the table as well, even if most of it didn't come in Division I.

Though this will be his first full season as head coach at WKU, Harper has had plenty of success in previous coaching jobs. He led Kentucky Wesleyan to two Division II championships in his nine seasons as coach and brought two NAIA championships to Oklahoma City University in the following three seasons, compiling a .833 winning percentage in his coaching career.

Harper is at the helm of a team that lost two starters from last season — guard Kahlil McDonald graduated and guard Derrick Gordon transferred to Massachusetts.

He said he has yet to determine what his starting lineup will look like and plans to experiment with different player combinations while he waits for players to earn full-time starting roles.

"I'm constantly telling guys, 'All I know is what I see,' and they have the opportunity every single day in practice to change jerseys to become a starter," Harper said.

"I think that's healthy for a basketball team, so guys don't get comfortable and other guys know there's always an opportunity."
Healthy, improved Dickerson returns for WKU

No longer plagued by shoulder problems, junior is ready for breakout year

Caden Dickerson is back, and he might be better than ever.
Dickerson, a redshirt junior, played significant time at the guard position for the Toppers in his first two seasons at WKU. As a sophomore, he appeared in every game and averaged six points and an assist.

An injured left shoulder hampered him coming in to last season, though — he had season-ending surgery four games into the season and attained a medical redshirt, giving him back a year of eligibility.

A year of recovery from a serious injury can take a lot out of an athlete, but Dickerson proved he hadn't lost a step when he scored nine points against Campbellsville on Monday in WKU's first exhibition game of the season.

Senior guard Jamal Crook said Dickerson has looked like a stronger scorer since he's returned to playing form. Crook would know — he and Dickerson have both been around the Topper program since 2009.

"His main thing is knocking down shots," Crook said. "He's looking good, his shot is looking better than I've ever seen it and once we get into the games, you all will see that. I'm glad to have him back."

The crowd at Diddle Arena sounded glad to have the guard back as well. He entered the game and scored his first points to loud applause.

He earned one of his biggest ovations on a play he didn't even score on. At one point midway through the first half, he went flying into some fold-up chairs on the sideline as he tried to save a ball from going out of bounds.

The crowd roared when he stood up and shook off the fall.

Crook said he joked about the instance with his teammate after the game.

"I was kind of teasing him a little bit about going and diving into the stands, hitting the chairs," he said. "I was glad to see him back and I felt good having him out there. I know he felt good being out there."

That save was far from his only physical moment of the game. Dickerson was making plays on offense and defense, even taking several charges throughout the night.

Crook said that's the kind of effort you can expect out of him.

"Caden does all the little things that you wouldn't expect — that's Caden," Crook said. "He's been doing it since freshman year, since I've known him. We came in together and that's Caden. He does stuff like that, he's a tough kid."

Dickerson, who said he hasn't been 100 percent healthy since his freshman season, credits his recovery to his athletic rehabilitation program with WKU physical therapist Cindy Hudson.

"I feel great," he said. "I worked with Cindy Hudson, she got me stronger than I've ever been, and I'm ready to go."

WKU appears deep at the guard position this season, with senior Jamal Crook, sophomore T.J. Price and Dickerson at the forefront of an undecided battle for spots on the starting roster. Price and Crook started against Campbellsville, along with junior guard Brandon Harris.

Coach Ray Harper, who has said he's still playing with rotations to determine who his starters will be, admitted he hasn't decided on what Dickerson's proper role in the WKU lineup is.

"I don't know how I can continue to not start Caden Dickerson," Harper said after the Campbellsville exhibition. "The reason I'm not starting him right now is I think he brings so much to us off the bench. That is the only reason. He's been terrific all summer."

LUCAS AULBACH
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM
Lady Toppers will depend on guard play this year

When the Lady Topper basketball team takes the court Friday in their first exhibition game of the season, there will be many new looks.

Not only is Michelle Clark-Heard’s new coaching staff young and the players younger and lesser in numbers and experience, but a new style of play will hit the floor.

Three of the team’s top four scorers from last year, forwards LaTeira Owens, Keshia Mosley and Vanessa Obafemi, graduated.

Forwards Teranie Thomas and Jasmine Johnson also graduated, and several other players left the program or were dismissed during the off-season.

This year’s squad consists of five freshmen, four sophomores, two juniors and no seniors.

One of those two juniors, guard Chaney Means is the only player who’s been around the program for more than two years.

She inherited one of the bigger leadership roles on the team but said the change from former coach Mary Taylor Cowles to Heard has been a “smooth” transition.

“I felt extremely comfortable with Coach Heard with her open-door policy,” Means said. “Having all these new girls in, I feel like we’re closer than we’ve ever been as a team.

“We’re getting to that point where I think you’ll be able to see on the court.”

Whereas last year’s offense was focused on front-court players like Owens and Mosley, this season’s game plan will be built around WKU’s eight guards.

The team has implemented the 4-out/1-in motion offense this year, a system sophomore Alexis Govan is pleased to play.

“I’m excited,” Govan said. “We’re not going to let our players cap out like last year where it was hard to get in the paint. I like to get in the paint so this is fun.

“Having a lot of guards is great, but our post players are going to mean a lot to us this year. Without them, we’d struggle.”

Heard said there will be “ups and downs” as the Lady Toppers continue to learn.

“It is an adjustment for them,” Heard said. “We’re more up and down the floor. “We run a lot and do a lot of different things, but in order for us to overcome our size differentials compared to some of the other teams, we’re going to have to do those things. They’ve really embraced it, and I’m excited about that.”

Heard said the team’s fifth place preseason placement will serve as momentum for the team, and with a team and style of play unlike any other team in the league, there could be some surprises in the season.

“We understand and know we’re going to have a battle on our hands every day,” Heard said. “But if we continue to prepare, we’ll have the opportunity to surprise some people.”

Heard said freshman Micah Jones has stepped up and could see significant time at point guard.

“She actually has stepped up and done a lot of great things,” Heard said of the Greensburg native. “She’s very hard-nosed tough and knows the game of basketball. She’s very steady and has done an incredible job moving to the point.”

With only nine active players to start the year, the starting line-up could vary from week to week.

Junior guard Bianca McGee is ineligible until December because of transfer issues, and freshman guard LeAsia Wright is out with a torn ligament in her thumb.

Heard said the team’s competitiveness is probably the best asset it has to begin the 2012-2013 campaign.

“That’s a great problem to have as a coach, to figure out who’s going to be the starter or who’s going to do this,” Heard said. “I think it’ll all balance itself out because of the way we’re playing.

“By getting to that point where we have that camaraderie that I think you’ll be able to see on the court.”

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“My goal is to get the best five on the floor in the beginning to bring that energy and spark, and then go from there with rotating and subbing people in.”
Harper to face familiar foe in Kentucky Wesleyan

The Panthers may play in a lower division than the Toppers, but they're no pushovers. KWC went 23-8 last season and advanced to the Division II Region Championship before falling to Bellarmine.

Tuesday night the Panthers took South Carolina to the wire in an exhibition, falling 68-67 on a late layup.

KWC was led that night by center Dominique Dawson, who scored 13 points and pulled down nine rebounds in the loss.

Sophomore forward George Fant said he's expecting a good game from the Panthers.

"Kentucky Wesleyan is a pretty good team, a really good team in their division," he said. "They're going to come out and try and challenge us, they're gonna challenge us pretty good."

Harper said the Panthers will give the Toppers a good test as they prepare to start the season.

"We've got Southern Miss Nov. 10, we needed to be challenged before we play them," he said. "We'll get that come Saturday night."

Kentucky Wesleyan at WKU
When: 7 p.m. Saturday
Where: Diddle Arena
TV: WKUsports.com video stream
Radio: 100.7 FM

Lady Toppers meet Harding for first exhibition

The Lady Toppers will kick-off their 2012-2013 run with an exhibition game in Diddle Arena against Harding University Friday night at 6.

New coach Michelle Clark-Heard said she's excited to finally get her first season underway.

"I came to the guys' exhibition game the other night, Heard said. "I just kind of wanted to walk in and get that feel again. I think our girls are super-excited, and they've been working hard."

This will be the first ever meeting between the Lady Toppers and the Lady Bison out of Searcy, Ark.

While WKU will participate in just one exhibition before starting the regular season at Murray State next week, Harding will conclude its third exhibition with the Lady Toppers.

Coming from the Division II Great American Conference, the Lady Bison pulled off a 68-54 upset of Division I opponent Oral Roberts on Monday night.

Heard also said exhibitions are tough because there's no film on the opponent, but added that doesn't stop a team from game planning a scrimmage.

"Looking at the box scores, they shoot the three pretty well," Heard said. "We're going to have to guard, and the biggest thing we want to focus on is us."

"We're working on a lot of things defensively, and we want to focus on those things to get us prepared to head down to Murray State."

Harding University at WKU
When: 6 p.m. Friday
Where: Diddle Arena
TV: WKUsports.com video stream
Radio: 100.7 FM
Best of luck to the new teams and this season!

Thanks for voting Chucks #1 in Bowling Green AGAIN!

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