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TOPS TAKE AIM AT BGSU
Topper offense eyeing breakout 2014 season

BY KYLE WILLIAMS
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM

WKU football opens its season under the bright lights of Smith Stadium for just the second time in nine years tonight when it welcomes Bowling Green State for what should be a high-scoring affair.

First-year Falcons Head Coach Dino Babers led Eastern Illinois to an average of 48.2 points per game last season and inherits a BGSU team that returns eight starters on offense.

However, Head Coach Jeff Brohm and the Hilltoppers return nine starters from the unit that ranked No. 2 in the Sun Belt last season and averaged 458.5 yards per game.

Most notably, WKU returns redshirt senior quarterback Brandon Doughty, who broke four program passing records last season, including the 23-year-old record for most single-season passing yards with 2,857.

The 6-foot 3-inch, 210-pound gunslinger said that the offense is working on being as sharp as possible in the second year of the system.

“We have to be consistent,” Doughty said. “Everyone has to play their role and everyone has to understand that it’s going to take 11 guys. Guards are going to have to help me out and help the receivers out and things are going to have to roll for us. We’re going to stay consistent throughout the whole game and just keep pushing.”

Doughty will hand the ball off to junior running back Leon Allen in the backfield and will look to connect with a plethora of experienced receiving options down the field this season.

Allen enters his first year as a full-time starter, having compiled career totals of 674 yards and seven touchdowns, five of which came last season.

Backing up Allen will be redshirt sophomore running backs Anthony Wales and Darmontre Warr. Wales totaled 112 yards last season for two scores on just 17 attempts. Warr spent last season as a fixture of the Hilltoppers’ special teams unit.

WKU returns receivers Willie McNeal, Joel German, Taywan Taylor, Nicholas Norris and tight ends Mitchell Henry, Tyler Higbee and Tim Gorski, who together hauled in a combined 184 receptions for 2,285 yards and 13 touchdowns last season.

The Hilltoppers also welcome junior college transfers Jared Dangerfield and Antwane Grant, who will add needed size to the receiving core. Dangerfield and Grant are 6-foot 3-inch and 6-foot 1-inch, respectively.

“I’ve been here for a long time and, honestly, I think this is probably the most explosive offense we’ve had as far as depth-wise, too. I think we have two or three deep at every position on the field,” McNeal said. “There’s going to be no letting up at all. If somebody goes down, somebody comes out and there’s still going to be that pressure. I think there will be a lot of pressure on the defensive coordinators, too, because you’re not just going to game plan on two or three guys on the offense, you’re really going to have to worry about everybody at every position.”

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When the Hilltoppers step onto the field tonight for their season-opening bout with the Bowling Green State Falcons, they'll be representing WKU football as a member of Conference USA for the first time. For some, it'll mark the first time they've ever fully geared up in preparation for a regular-season game.

With 67 underclassmen comprising the 105-man roster, WKU is the youngest team in C-USA and the 25th youngest team in the country.

Conversely, the Hilltopper coaching staff is already more experienced than any other coaching staff in its new conference.

Head Coach Jeff Brohm's staff has totaled 238 years of combined coaching experience on the collegiate level, which is 51 years more than any other C-USA staff.

“I feel great about our coaching staff,” Brohm said. “Not only do they have a ton of experience, but they're very proven coaches. They love being here. They love working with our guys.”

In addition, Brohm and his staff have familiarized themselves with the area over their lengthy careers. The Hilltopper coaching staff has allotted 64 years of college football coaching experience in Kentucky, and for each of the past 19 years, at least one member of the staff has been coaching in the bluegrass state.

Brohm was born and raised roughly 116 miles up Interstate 65 in Louisville, where he scored a combined 56 touchdowns in his time behind center at Trinity High School. He then recorded 5,451 yards passing and 44 total touchdowns at the University of Louisville from 1989-93.

The first-year head coach spent seven years in the National Football League and played with the likes of Steve Young, Jerry Rice, Warren Sapp and Derrick Brooks among others. Brohm's lone touchdown pass was to Terrell Owens.

“Getting coached from a coach that actually did it with a helmet, you know, it’s a big difference,” redshirt senior receiver Willie McNeal said at the team's Monday press conference. “He could tell you about his past experiences at times like this and how he prepared.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

Associate Head Coach Nick Holt instructs players during the WKU football practice on Tuesday, Aug. 26 at Smith Stadium. Holt orchestrated the 10th ranked pass defense and the 14th ranked total defense in the nation last season.

SIDELINES

He’s waited, and Jeff Brohm’s time is now

B Y E L L I O T P R A T T
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I’ve been waiting for this moment about as long as Head Coach Jeff Brohm has, but not in the sense you’re probably thinking.

Brohm has been waiting for this night his entire life. I’ve been waiting for tonight since January when he took the job.

He hasn’t said it, and he probably never will, but I’m sure he’s tired of answering the typical preseason questions like, “How do you replace so-and-so?” “Who needs work?” and “How anxious are you to finally coach your first game?”

Well, now here we are.

So-and-so is replaced, the work is done and as you can imagine, Brohm is ready and anxious to coach his first game as the boss.

I’m ready to evaluate how this team matches up against other opponents. Brohm has his team as ready as they can be for Bowling Green State tonight.

But that doesn’t mean he’s not nervous heading into his first game as a head coach.

“I think you always have a little bit of nerves and I definitely have those nerves right now,” Brohm said. “You want your team to play well, you want all the hard work to pay off, you want them to see the results, but not until you really get out there and get your feet wet do you know exactly where you stand. The fact that we’re playing a very good opponent is great for us. We get to see exactly where we stand right off the bat.”

It won’t be a cupcake opener for Brohm’s debut either. Heck, there are no cupcakes on the schedule at all in their first year in Conference USA.

Brohm’s not going to have a get-your-feet wet game to feel out his team and his head coaching styles. He prepared for all of that last year under Bobby Petrino and in years past when he coached for him. His 12-month audition was good enough to land him the job in January with the idea of maintaining the momentum left over from last year.

Instead, they’re getting the defending Mid-American Conference champions Bowling Green.

The Falcons have a new coach in Dino Babers, who proved at Eastern Illinois he knows a thing or two about putting a high-scoring offense on the field.

So Brohm gets to start the season off at home against a team that is favored to win by a touchdown by multiple betting lines. So would a WKU win be considered a statement win?

“It’d be huge. It’d definitely be a big win for us as a university, as a program,” senior defensive back Cam Thomas said. “Definitely a big win for our team to start off the season right in Conference USA even though it’s an out-of-conference game, it’d just be big to make a statement against a high-caliber opponent that won the MAC championship last year. We’re ready to make a statement this season.”

This team is ready to show they won’t miss a beat in the system Petrino established last year, and Brohm is ready to show that 11 years of waiting in the wings of his mentors could finally pay off.

Get ready. The Brohm era at WKU officially begins today.

So check your pulse, and let’s play football.
**Hilltopper Schedule**

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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Louisiana Tech</td>
<td>Ruston</td>
<td>Skip Holtz</td>
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<td>Huntington</td>
<td>Doc Holliday</td>
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Brohm landed a job at his alma mater in 2003, serving as quarterbacks coach until 2006 when he was named assistant head coach. In 2008, he added offensive coordinator to his title. He’s made stops at FAU, Illinois and UAB before arriving at WKU in 2013.

The Hilltoppers return six of nine assistant coaches from a season ago in defensive coordinator Nick Holt, cornerbacks coach Ricky Brumfield, offensive line coach Neil Callaway, defensive backs coach Mike Cassity, defensive tackles coach Don Dunn and wide receivers coach JaMarcus Shepard.

Holt’s Hilltopper defense ranked No. 10 in the nation in pass defense and No. 14 overall in total defense. Under Holt’s tutelage in 2008, USC led the country in scoring defense at just nine points per game and allowed a total of 221.77 yards per game, which ranks as the lowest total by a Pac-10 program since 1971.

Cassity and Brumfield’s secondary units contributed to the Sun Belt’s best overall defense last season with a league-best 14 interceptions, led by now-graduated Tyree Robinson and redshirt senior Cam Thomas, who combined for nine. Thomas led the Sun Belt with five interceptions and 15 passes defended.

“We have a lot of experience,” Thomas said. “Experience in bowl games and big-time games in different conferences. They all have different ways of going about things, but they come together as one unit to get us ready and teach us all different traits that they taught the past guys...so we’ve just been trying to inherit those different traits and come together as one unit.”

Callaway and Dunn have compiled over 75 years of collegiate coaching experience between them, and although Shepard has just six years of experience under his belt, he’s one of the more vocal coaches on the staff.

“They’ve put a lot of pressure on the quarterbacks. Not just the quarterbacks, but everyone on the team,” Dougherty said. “I think that’s good, so the game is easy. A lot of yelling, a lot of screaming, but those guys are so knowledgeable of the game and understand x’s and o’s and why we’re calling things.”

Despite this being the first year on the Hill for offensive coordinator Tyson Helton, defensive ends coach Ken Delgado and running backs coach Greg Nord, they don’t come without strong college coaching backgrounds, either.

Helton has held positions at Memphis, UAB and Cincinnati prior to his gig at WKU and Delgado and Nord each have more than 20 years to their name.

The Hilltoppers’ plan is simple – they’re combining youth and athleticism with an abundance of coaching experience. The plan is simple, but the game plan come Friday night is sure to be anything but.
Redshirt senior wide receiver Willie McNeal's family struggles motivated him to be successful on the field as well as in the classroom.

**Quick Stats**

- McNeal leads the Toppers in TD receptions the past two seasons.
- Career REC: 115
- Career Yards: 1,515
- Career TDS: 13

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**ALL FOR THEM**

McNeal turns adversity into motivation

**By Elliott Pratt**

sports@WKUHerald.com

A tattoo featuring two faces stretches across Willie McNeal's chest.

On the right side of his chest is a portrait of a woman's face — on the left, a man's. In between the two faces is a cross with the words "Rest In Peace" written on a scroll.

It serves as a reminder of the long road McNeal has taken to get to this point as a redshirt senior heading into his final season as a wide receiver for WKU.

McNeal's mother, Linda Jackson died when he was 13. His father passed away two years later.

"Life wasn't easy," McNeal said. "My family would struggle. Living with my mom, who was a single parent, she did her best to take care of me and my brothers and sisters. With my mom's passing, I moved in with my brothers and sisters. I'll say it wasn't as rough as it was just living with my mom. It still wasn't easy."

When his mother passed away, McNeal moved in with his oldest sister, Malinda Greene, who is 11 years older. Greene also took in McNeal's other sister and four other brothers, while at the same time, raising four children of her own, all in one house.

"In school and football, I always try to push for her — to make her happy," McNeal said. "Playing football I know really makes her happy. I try to make plays for her. She can't really afford to come to home games, so she watches games on TV and on the links online she can watch."

"...she took care of us. I appreciate my older sister for that. Everything I do, I do for her."

McNeal never thought about college growing up with his neighborhood friends in Bradenton, Florida. The topic of discussion was always which of their favorite NFL teams they'd play for.

That changed when Willie was offered a scholarship to play football at WKU in 2008. McNeal knew the blessing in front of him was too good to waste. Terry Obee was WKU's receivers' coach in McNeal's first year on the Hill. He saw an ambitious kid wanting to maximize the opportunity before him.

"Where he came from was a little different than being here," Obee said. "He learned how to come here and work his butt off from where he came from. The kid knows how to survive. He knew how to take advantage of everything at this university."

McNeal made noise right out of the gate as a redshirt freshman in the return game. He earned freshman All-American honors as a kickoff returner averaging 22 yards per return, including a 90-yard return for a touchdown against Kentucky.

At the time, McNeal was riding high. He and previous running back Bobby Rainey were the Toppers' two highlight machines on a 2-10 Topper squad.

McNeal finished the season second on the team with 1,408 all-purpose yards and was eager to touch the ball on every snap in any way he could get it.

Former coach Willie Taggart called McNeal a playmaker despite being "the littlest guy out there."

"He always wants the ball, which I love," Taggart said in 2010. "He doesn't just talk about it, but he is about it. He constantly plays fast. If you watch the kid, he's just going faster than everyone else. He's not necessarily faster than all of them, but he plays faster."

McNeal's play finally caught up to him the next season.

McNeal suffered tears to his right anterior cruciate ligament and right posterior cruciate ligament when two linemen fell on his knee in a drill during the spring of 2011.
WKU NAMES TO WATCH

Jeff Brohm: Head Coach
- Brohm, an 11-year college coaching vet- eran, takes over as head coach after serv- ing as the team’s assistant head coach and offensive coordinator last season.
- Led the No. 2-ranked offense in the Sun Belt last season.
- WKU offense set single-season records last season for total yards (5,502), yards per play (6.3), yards per game (458.5) and passing yards per game (261.7).

Brandon Doughty: redshirt senior quarterback
- Holds program records in single-season passing yards (2,857), completion percentage (65.8), single-game completions (29) and single-game passing yards (387).
- Led WKU offense to 458.5 total yards per game, which is a single-season record.

Cam Thomas: redshirt senior defensive back
- Led Sun Belt last season with five interceptions and 15 passes defended last season. Those num- bers ranked No. 20 and No. 17 in the country, respectively.
- Named to Jim Thorpe Award Watch List.

Leon Allen: junior running back
- Served as primary backup to All-American running back Antonio Andrews last season.
- Tallied 357 yards on 72 carries and five touchdowns last year. Owns career totals of 674 yards and seven scores.

BGSU NAMES TO WATCH

Dino Babers: Head Coach
- 19-7 career record as head coach.
- Led Eastern Illinois to 48.2 points per game last season, which led the FCS.
- EIU quarterback recorded 8,873 yards passing and 84 touchdowns in two seasons under Babers.

Matt Johnson: redshirt junior quarterback
- Threw for 3,467 yards and 25 touchdowns while tossing seven picks last season.
- Named to Manning Award Watch List.

Travis Greene: redshirt junior running back
- All-time single-season rushing leader in BGSU history with 1,594 yards last season. Added 13 touchdowns.
- Recorded nine games of 100+ yards.

D.J. Lynch: redshirt senior linebacker
- Led team with 85 tackles last season, eight coming for loss.
- Named to 2nd team All-MAC.

Gabe Martin: redshirt senior linebacker
- Played in seven games in 2013, re- cording 36 tackles.
- Named to All-MAC team despite missing final six games of the season.
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Herald Sports Staff Predictions

Kyle Williams, sports editor:
There's a lot of uncertainty heading into tonight's game, but one thing's for sure — it's bound to be a shootout. Both offenses averaged more than 30 points per game in 2013, so it's likely to come down to which team wins the defensive chess match. But the Hilltoppers and the Falcons both led their respective conference in total defense last season, making this pick even harder. Coaching continuity is the difference for me. Head Coach Jeff Brohm brings back six of nine assistant coaches from last year's team while BGSU returns only one. WKU 35, BGSU 31

Elliott Pratt, sports columnist:
The first game of the year is always a game of unknowns. Will the Hilltoppers carry over momentum from last season's end with Brohm at the helm? Can the defense keep up with the Falcons? I think WKU's offense comes out on fire, but I think replacing last year's talent on defense is going to take a few games to settle in.
It'll be an offensive showcase that comes down to the wire. It's a toss up for me. WKU 27, BGSU 24

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

McNeal was sidelined for the year, and humbled for much longer.
"Football is not always promised," McNeal said. "With my injury, it lets me know that it can be taken away."
McNeal returned in style in 2012 and hasn't looked back. He's led the Hilltoppers in touchdown receptions in each of the past two seasons.
McNeal embraces his accomplishments on the field and makes plays for his family in honor of what he's gone through to get to this point, but the bigger honor comes off the field.
"It wasn't a fantasy life," McNeal said on his upbringing. "I didn't get everything I wanted, so I never asked for anything. I think that's what gives me the grind now. I'm mature enough to know I have to get an education. I graduated last semester and now I start my master's this fall."
The name "Uncle Willie" is a common calling in the WKU locker room these days. McNeal is one of the oldest players on the team, having been at the university since 2009.
It's a name he's earned among the youth of the team not only as the elder statesman of the group, but as a sign of respect for what he can teach them.
"It's funny, coming in as a freshman, we used to pick on older guys," McNeal said. "I used to call him old man and stuff like that. Now I'm the old man. So we have the little thing in the locker room where everybody calls me Uncle Willie."
"I like the jokes and stuff like that and the fact that guys respect me as the older guy." Obee remembers coaching a freshman who had never had the luxury of a stable household. Now when he sees McNeal, he sees a man who has grown up before his eyes.
"He wasn't always doing everything perfectly," Obee said. "Sometimes he would have a hiccup here and there, but Willie has matured big time since he's been here. He's taken advantage of every opportunity. He's doing well in school and he's on top of it. He knows how to take care of business now. From where he came from, that's a huge change."

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2
WKU will be without the services of Luis Polanco, Sean Conway and Ed Hazelett off the offensive line this season, but it will be an experienced group nonetheless with redshirt senior Cameron Clemmons and redshirt sophomore Forrest Lamp. The duo started each game last season at left and right guard, respectively.
An unfamiliar face on the offense this season is first-year offensive coordinator Tyson Helton. Helton, who spent last season as Cincinnati's tight ends/special teams coach, said that since the offense has potential, it's important for the team not to get ahead of itself and force miscues.
"Here's what you have to do — you take care of the football," Helton said. "You let the game take its natural process. If we get up early, that's great, but it's a four-quarter game. We talk about it all the time. Offense, take care of the ball, manage the offense, your plays will come and when your number is called, make your plays."
Following an 18-day fall camp schedule and three game-week practices, Brohm and the Hilltoppers are finally prepared to put their experienced offense to the test.
"Our guys, even though they've worked hard, they have to go out and perform game day," Brohm said. "They have to execute the calls that are being called. They have to play extremely hard, they have to play fast, they have to play with great instincts, they have to play tough, they have to be able to put the pressure on when we have momentum and when the other team gets it, they have to be able to find a way to get tougher and stop that momentum."
WKU football takes its team photo inside Smith Stadium during Hilltopper media day on Aug. 2, 2014.