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ON ANOTHER LEVEL
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Band of brothers
Hilltopper receiving core exemplifies ‘for each other’ mentality

BY KYLE WILLIAMS
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM

If you’ve ever found yourself anywhere within the vicinity of Smith Stadium while WKU football practice is in session, chances are you’ve probably heard Hilltopper wide receivers coach JaMarcus Shephard.

Shephard, who spent two years as a defensive analyst and volunteer quality control assistant before being promoted to wide receivers coach this season, is one of the more vocal coaches on WKU’s sideline, and it’s paid off thus far this season.

WKU is just one of three teams in the nation with six different receivers having totaled at least 20 catches. In addition, four Hilltopper receivers rank within the Conference USA’s top 10 in receptions per game, and three rank inside the top 10 in receiving yards per game.

“Obviously, we’ve been very successful — probably a little more successful than we’ve been in the past — as far as catching the ball, and getting yards after the catch,” Shephard said. “…I think those guys are taking pride in finishing. If you ever come out to our practices, I’m constantly yelling ‘finish, finish, finish, finish,’ so that’s important. Obviously, it’s showing on the field.”

The Hilltopper offense, which ranks fifth in the country at 547 yards per game, has been a result of a strong correlation between redshirt senior quarterback Brandon Doughty and his receiving core. However, the team’s dropped four of its last five contests, and in the second halves against UAB and FAU, the offense totaled just 232 yards and 19 points, spurring Shephard to challenge his receivers.

“When I talked to them on Sunday when they came in, I sort of challenged them a little bit and said, ‘What do we stand for as a receiving core?’” Shephard said. “…The number one thing they said was ‘brotherhood — we are a band of brothers.’ That’s a great thing. You want that from those guys.

“Ultimately, when we’re looking at it as a receiving core, we have to win the game. We feel like we should be the group that wins the game for the team.”

The Fort Wayne, Indiana native said one major area that his group of receivers exemplifies brotherhood in is blocking.

“We take a lot of pride in that,” sophomore receiver Taywan Taylor said. “Coach Shep preaches on that a lot. Yards after the catch — that’s what makes a great receiver. We have to take some pressure off our quarterback. …When we get the ball, we take pride in making plays and making people miss.

“As we go along during the season, we just look at what we can do to get better like blocking, coming off the ball and stuff like that, and just doing it for each other.”

The receiving core has unofficially accounted for 890 yards after the catch, accounting for 36 percent of Doughty’s 2,500 passing yards, which is the fourth-best total of any quarterback this season.

SEE RECEIVING CORE PAGE 4
Execution key for Hilltopper defense moving forward

BY ELLIOTT PRATT
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM

Redshirt senior defensive back Cam Thomas wants to do everything in his power to help the Hilltopper defense obtain an attitude. The three-year starter had a long talk with Head Coach Jeff Brohm on Sunday following WKU’s 45-38 loss at Florida Atlantic, where the defense allowed 31 second-half points.

For his last go-around in his senior season, he wants numbers like 533 yards and 39 points given up per game to decrease dramatically.

But time is running out.

“We just talked about things that we could change,” Thomas said. “I went in there and got the team together and just made sure those guys knew what was on the head coach’s mind and him to see what’s on my mind also so we can change this around. It’s my last year, and I also wanted these guys to go in the right direction going forward to their junior and senior year.”

Halfway through the season, WKU (2-4, 0-3 Conference USA) is still searching for its first league win and hopes to find it Saturday in the first-ever meeting against Old Dominion (3-4, 1-3) in a 3 p.m. CT kickoff. However, it’s the second-half kickoff that has the WKU defense worried.

“I saw us lose our mojo a little bit in the second half on defense,” Brohm said. “I didn’t think we played with the all-out bounce in the step that we could have. I think we got tired a little bit. We’re going to have to keep guys a little bit fresh. Some of our most experienced guys, our guys that have played the most, got a little tired in the second half, and they weren’t able to play all out like they should have. So we have to address that.”

Defensive Coordinator Nick Holt said making adjustments at halftime isn’t the problem. The problem is executing them. There won’t be any room for error facing Old Dominion senior quarterback Taylor Heinicke, who was awarded the Walter Payton Award in 2012, given to the Football Championship Subdivision’s best player.

Much like WKU’s defense, the Monarchs’ offense is seeing its fair share of growing pains. A youthful offensive line and receiving core are working with their first year at the FBS level. However, Heinicke remains a prolific signal caller with a 62.5 completion percentage for 1,815 yards and 18 touchdowns on the year.

“He is a heck of a football player, and when you watch the games this season, he sits in the pocket and doesn’t get rattled,” Holt said. “He rarely throws bad footballs. His completion percentage is pretty good, and he doesn’t have a lot of interceptions. He’s a tough kid, as you can see, because he takes some licks. It’ll be a big challenge for us.”

Despite the youth of ODU’s offense, with the exception of its quarterback, Thomas understands the defense is not to be taken lightly, especially if WKU wants to keep aspirations of a bowl game alive.

But that requires finishing the game.

“You have to fight,” Thomas said. “There’s no other way to say it. We have to come out and bust our butts and get that fire back, get that swagger back and get the will to win.

“The adversity is going to come, but we still have six games to play to get a bowl game. All of that is still in our vision, and that’s what we’re going to do.”
Selig’s impact as AD still resonating at WKU

BY ELLIOTT PRATT
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM

Todd Stewart had no intention of becoming WKU’s athletic director when he was hired by the university in 2008 as associate athletic director of communications and media relations.

In fact, he hadn’t worked on a college campus since serving as a graduate assistant at Tennessee in 1990.

“I didn’t really start thinking about becoming an athletic director until after Wood (Selig) left,” Stewart said.

Stewart, WKU’s athletic director since 2012, will welcome back the man who hired him when Wood Selig brings Old Dominion to town to face WKU.

Mayor Bruce Wilkerson has declared Oct. 25 ‘Wood Selig Appreciation Day,’ and the former WKU athletic director and his family will be honored on the field after the first quarter on Saturday.

Selig, who served as director of athletics at WKU from 1999 to 2010, hasn’t been back to Bowling Green in four years.

“I’m very thrilled to be coming back with my wife and three children who really look at Bowling Green as their home because they spent a preponderance of years growing up in Bowling Green,” Selig said. “It’s a very special place, a very special institution and I can not wait to get back and spend a weekend there.”

Former Athletic Director Ross Bjork, currently at Ole Miss, bridged the gap between Selig and Stewart for two years. Much has changed around campus since Selig took the same role at ODU, a school located in Norfolk, Virginia, where Selig was raised.

But it was Selig who set the tone for success that the two following athletic directors have been able to maintain.

“He has a pretty distinguished tenure in which a lot of notable things happened,” Stewart said.

“There was success on the field of play, there was success in expansion with (Smith) stadium, Diddle Arena, the track and the Paul Orberson Clubhouse. A lot happened under Wood’s watch, and I’m glad we can recognize him for that.”

Selig’s 11-year tenure is highlighted by the more than $100 million renovation projects that included an additional side to Smith Stadium, an expansion of Diddle Arena and the building of the Charles M. Rueter Track and Field Complex.

WKU won 66 Sun Belt Conference championships and saw the football program move from Division I-AA to I-A in 2007.

Volleyball coach Travis Hudson, who is now in his 20th year of coaching at WKU, said the improvements of the facilities were a direct result of Selig’s push for upgrading facilities.

Hudson’s time at WKU started in 1995 with Selig arriving on the Hill a few years later. The coach said when Selig stepped in, it didn’t take long to see his passion for expanding the athletic department as a whole.

“It was a real cultural shift within our athletics department,” Hudson said. “The thing that most impressed me about Wood’s time here — and certainly it affected our volleyball program — was he wanted to see everybody succeed. He gave you a chance. Certainly there’s more importance in certain sports than there are in others based on ticket sales and those sorts of things. That didn’t keep him from trying to try to help everyone do what they need to do to achieve success and I always respected him for that.”

Hudson, soccer coach Jason Neidell, swimming coach Bruce Marchionda and track and field coach Eric Jenkins are the only coaches still at WKU since Selig left for ODU. WKU’s major revenue sports have seen all-new faces at the helm of each since Selig’s departure, but he’s still proud of the fact that he had a small part in laying the foundation for the current state of WKU athletics.

“It’s very rewarding to think that you had a small part in that success,” Selig said. “You’re just happy for them individually because they’re such great people and you want to see them continue to have success like they’re having.”
Doughty currently ranks second and fourth nationally in passing yards and total offense at 2,500 and 415 yards per game. He needs three touchdowns to break a single-season touchdown pass record of 22.

Holt ranks first in the Conference USA and 20th nationally with 10.3 tackles per game and has a total of 62, including 33 solo tackles. He’s also tallied five tackles for a loss of 19 yards and a fumble recovery.

Heinicke, a three-year starter, won the 2012 Walter Payton Award, given annually to the most outstanding offensive player in the FCS. He’s allotted 51 touchdowns and just 16 interceptions during his time at ODU.

Lawry, a freshman running back is set to start for the first time in his career against the Hilltoppers on Saturday. He currently ranks ninth in Conference USA in touchdowns scored with seven.
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