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## WKU Offense

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WKU seniors have unfinished business to complete

By Elliott Pratt
Sports@WKUHerald.com

When defensive back Cam Thomas steps onto Feix Field for the final time Saturday for WKU’s contest against Texas-San Antonio, he’s not sure how he’ll feel.

“I’m going to do like I do every game, play with excitement, talk, I’m going to dance, have fun,” Thomas said. “But at the same time at the end of it, I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know if I’ll be able to leave the field or not.”

Eventually that day, Thomas and 17 other seniors will have to leave that field for the last time wearing a Hilltopper jersey.

For eight of them, the first time they stepped on the field was actually the start of a new era.

Man, the times have changed.

Guys like Thomas and quarterback Brandon Doughty, offensive lineman Cam Clemmons and wide receiver Willie McNeal, just to name a few who were redshirted their freshman year, saw the program at its lowest. They were recruited to help rebuild a program that went 0-12 in David Elson’s last season as coach.

Then Willie “Who-Got-It-Better-Than-Us” Taggart brought in the current group of redshirt seniors who watched WKU struggle through a 2-10 first season on the Hill during the program’s second season in the Football Bowl Subdivision.

Since then, the team has gone 7-5 in 2011, 7-5 in 2012 and 8-4 last season, with one bowl appearance coming in 2012.

Talk about a group that turned something around.

“They’ve definitely helped build this program,” Head Coach Jeff Brohm said. “To send them out with a victory would mean a whole lot. I think that they’ve invested a lot. It’s important for them to win. It’s important for them to finish on a high note.”

Take this for how much things have changed. When Brohm served as Florida Atlantic’s quarterbacks coach in 2010, he recruited Doughty and actually got a verbal commit from the quarterback in January of 2010.

In his senior year at North Broward Prep, Doughty had actually cancelled a recruiting trip to WKU because he “wasn’t too fond of the Hilltoppers’ offensive style,” according to an article by FAUOwlAccess.com in 2010.

Then, abracadabra, look what we have here in 2014.

Brohm is a first-year head coach calling the plays for Doughty, who will go down statistically as one of the best quarterbacks in WKU history.

It truly is remarkable to sit back and look at what they’ve been able to accomplish. The best part is business isn’t over after Saturday.

The past three years, WKU has closed its season finale at Smith Stadium. The last time they played their final game on the road was in 2010, when these redshirt seniors were freshmen.

“It’s going to be fun,” McNeal said. “At first, I thought it was going to be a bittersweet moment with the last home game, but I can’t wait for it. My family is going to be here. It’s going to be their first game on the Hill.”

I’m sure what can make McNeal’s family — along with 17 other seniors’ families — happy is, of course, a win that makes WKU bowl eligible for the fourth-straight year.

This is the group that has the opportunity to bounce back from another season of missing a bowl invitation. There aren’t many schools that can say they have a group that has been so close to the prize in the way the Hilltoppers have, only to have it snatched from their grasp.

But these seniors haven’t wavered. They’ve stuck with it, and built something out of nothing at WKU.

The opportunity is well within their reach, and it depends on them to determine if the experience can be complete with a mission accomplished.

Tops’ balanced offense set to match-up with experienced UTSA defense

By Kyle Williams
Sports@WKUHerald.com

Junior running back Leon Allen’s 345-yard rushing performance did more than break records — it gave the Hilltoppers balance.

Throughout the season, Head Coach Jeff Brohm has expressed the importance of the ground game for WKU (5-5, 2-4 Conference USA) in order to open up potential to hurt teams through the air.

After averaging 104.3 rushing yards per game in eight games coming into the matchup with Army, Allen’s program and C-USA single-game record 345 yards upped that average to 131 per game. At the same time, it balanced out the Hilltopper offense.

“Running the ball is very big,” redshirt senior offensive lineman Cam Clemmons said.

“That’s something we’ve always stressed. Especially coming off a poor performance against UTEP, it was much needed. …I’m proud of Leon. A lot of times, he’ll take simple runs and break them out for 80 yards like he did and make us look good.”

The offensive unit will need those options in Saturday’s Senior Day matchup with UTSA (3-7, 2-4 C-USA), as the Roadrunners enter the contest with the league’s second-ranked defense.

UTSA has only allowed 23.9 points and 354 yards per game in 10 games this season and has eight seniors anchoring its starting defense. The Roadrunners’ average yards allowed per game is good for 35th nationally.

Although the Hilltoppers have shown improvement in areas during their two-game
Hilltopper defense hitting its stride at the right time

BY KYLE WILLIAMS
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM

Following a 59-10 loss at Louisiana Tech on Nov. 1, it’s safe to say that the Hilltopper defense faced its fair share of scrutiny. It’s also safe to say the unit responded.

The Hilltoppers (5-5, 2-4 Conference USA) have held UTEP (6-4, 4-2 C-USA) and Army (3-7) to 394 and a season-low 333 yards, respectively, after giving up an average of 544.1 total yards per game through the first eight contests.

They did it at a good time, too, as the Hilltoppers are set to put a close to the home schedule on Saturday at 11 a.m. against UTEP (3-7, 2-4 C-USA) with a chance to gain bowl eligibility for the fourth-straight season. UTSAs offense is averaging 288.4 yards per game coming into Saturday’s matchup and the status of the Roadrunners’ starting quarterback, Tucker Carter, is up in the air due to a hit to the head on Nov. 8 against Rice.

With UTSAs No. 2 going down with a broken hand earlier this season, that leaves third-string quarterback Austin Robinson as the only option for the Roadrunners.

Robinson has played in seven games this season, five with extended playing time, and thrown for 585 yards, one touchdown and four interceptions. The freshman completed 27-of-44 passes for 175 yards and an interception last week in a 12-10 win against Southern Miss.

The Roadrunner offense has failed to score a touchdown in two of its previous three games, which bodes well for the confident Hilltopper defensive unit that’s forced three-straight scoreless fourth quarters at home, dating back to WKU’s 66-51 win over Old Dominion on Oct. 25.

Despite the apparent advantage, redshirt senior defensive back Cam Thomas said the Hilltoppers won’t take any team lightly after a rough beginning to the season.

“I think we’re re-focused and now we know what’s at stake,” Thomas said. “That’s what I told the guys before practice and after practice. God put us in this position for a reason and now we just have to attack it and I feel like that’s what we’re going to do.”

Senior running back David Glasco II leads the Roadrunner rushing attack with 441 yards and four touchdowns on the season. The freshman quarterback Robinson is third on that list, behind sophomore running back Jarveon Williams with 172 yards.

With the Roadrunners’ first option at quarterback questionable and with Robinson’s dual-threat capability, Thomas said the defensive unit is preparing for anything and everything on Saturday.

“We’re definitely preparing for two,” Thomas said. “We heard that No. 6 (Carter) is going to come in late in the game or for just a few snaps. Really, we’re preparing for the whole offense. The skill guys, we’ve been watching, and they’ve got some decent guys. At the same time, we’re preparing for the scramble and the pocket passer.”

If bowl eligibility wasn’t enough, Saturday marks Senior Day on the Hill. Senior defensive lineman T.J. Smith said the WKU defense always plays for each other, and on Saturday, it’ll be no different.

“We all play hard, and we all play for each other,” Smith said. “It’s my last time going around, so I’m going to play hard for each one of my teammates because I want to look back on life and feel like I gave everything I had.”

Redshirt senior defensive back Cam Thomas (19) and junior linebacker Daqual Randall (9) attempt to tackle Army running back Larry Dixon during last Saturday’s game. Thomas and Randall combined for six tackles in WKU’s 52-24 victory.

OFFENSE
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

A win streak, Brohm said they’ll have to do that and more in preparation for UTSA.

“After watching the (Army) video, I do think we played harder,” Brohm said. “I do think there’s a lot of room for improvement still and our players understand that. So hopefully we can build upon that, have a great week of practice and find a way to win against a very, very tough football team.”

With a win, the Hilltoppers would notch their best home winning percentage since going 5-0 in 2004. WKU currently averages 50.2 points and 546.2 yards per game in its five home games this season.

A win would also solidify the team’s bowl eligibility for the fourth-straight season, but according to Brohm, the number one priority is sending the Hilltopper seniors out with a win in their last game in Smith Stadium.

“It’s really our job as a staff, and the rest of the team, to go out with a home win,” Brohm said. “This is a tough football team to go out with a home win against. They’re very, very experienced and good on defense.

“(It’s) going to be a challenge, but we need to find a way to win this for our seniors.”
HILLTOPPER SENIORS

Quarterback
Brandon Doughty

Offensive lineman
Cam Clemmons

Defensive back
Cam Thomas

Offensive lineman
Connor Popeck

Defensive back
Dalton Patterson

Fullback
Demetrius Coley

Offensive lineman
Derrick Stark

Defensive back
DeVante Thomas

Wide receiver
Joel German

Wide receiver
Lonnie Turner

Kicker
Mike Mugler

Tight end
Mitchell Henry

Defensive lineman
Raphael Cox

Defensive back
Ricardo Singh

Defensive back
Rico Brown

Defensive lineman
T.J. Smith

Linebacker
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Wide receiver
Willie McNeal

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WKU aiming for fourth-straight season of bowl eligibility

BY ELLIOTT PRATT
SPORTS@WKUHERALD.COM

WKU is facing a familiar situation.

A Hilltopper win over Texas-San Antonio (3-7, 2-4 Conference USA) on Saturday will place them at the six-win mark for the fourth-consecutive season, meaning the fourth-straight year WKU reaches bowl eligibility.

The downside? WKU (5-5, 2-4 C-USA) has only been to the postseason once with an invitation to the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl in Detroit, Michigan in 2012, where the Hilltoppers dropped a 24-21 decision to Central Michigan.

The likelihood of WKU receiving an invitation for only the second time in four seasons is much higher than it would have been if the Hilltoppers were in the same position as members of the Sun Belt Conference, but that isn’t on Head Coach Jeff Brohm’s mind.

“That’s out of our hands,” Brohm said. “All we can control is winning this football game. It’s important for us. Yes, we have to win this. All we can do is do everything we can to try to win this game and go from there.”

Last season under former coach Bobby Petrino, WKU closed out its season on a four-game winning streak to finish 8-4. However, the Sun Belt Conference only had two guaranteed bowl tie-ins with the New Orleans Bowl and the GoDaddy Bowl. Louisiana-Lafayette and Arkansas State, who finished first and second in the league last season, respectively, were the only two Sun Belt schools to play in the postseason.

The story is much different in Conference USA.

Through 2019, C-USA has 10 bowl affiliations with five guaranteed positions. The conference has primary bowl tie-ins with the Bahamas Bowl, Beef ‘O’ Brady’s Bowl, Boca Raton Bowl, New Mexico Bowl and the Heart of Dallas Bowl.

C-USA also has an agreement with the Independence Bowl if the Southeastern Conference and the Atlantic Coast Conference do not fill the game with an eligible team.

If No. 18 Marshall (10-0, 6-0) finishes the season undefeated, it could earn a New Years Day bowl bid, leaving the five primary bowls for C-USA left to fill.

As of now, Marshall, Louisiana Tech (7-3, 6-0), Rice (6-4, 4-2) and UTEP (6-4, 4-2) are already eligible for a bowl game. WKU, Middle Tennessee (5-5, 4-1) and UAB (5-5, 3-3) have the chance of becoming eligible.

WKU’s path to reach its sixth win of the year Saturday against UTSA appears easy on paper, but players like redshirt senior cornerback Cam Thomas know too well what it feels like to miss a postseason opportunity.

“When you look at our track record, when the big games came, we stepped up to the challenge,” Thomas said. “We definitely don’t like to play down to our competition. That’s bitten us in the butt early in the season. I think we’re re-focused and now we know what’s at stake. That’s what I told the guys before practice and after practice. God put us in this position for a reason and now we just have to attack it and I feel like that’s what we’re going to do.”
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