9-10-2015

UA12/2/1 Topper Extra - Right at Home

WKU Student Affairs

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records

Part of the African American Studies Commons, Higher Education Administration Commons, Journalism Studies Commons, Mass Communication Commons, and the Sports Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_ua_records/6426

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in WKU Archives Records by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
RIGHT AT HOME

WKU looks for 2-0 start after gritty Vandy win. La Tech up next at home.
WKU looks for revenge against Louisiana Tech

BY BILLY RUTLEDGE
HERALD.SPORTS@WKU.EDU

The WKU football team owns an interesting statistic.

Going into this week, the Hilltoppers (1-0) own the sixth-longest FBS winning streak of six games.

Their last loss came on Nov. 1, 2014, in the form of a 59-10 thumping at the hands of Louisiana Tech in Ruston.

Now, after starting the season with a win over Vanderbilt on the road, WKU hosts the Bulldogs (1-0) for the season opening home game at Smith Stadium in search of revenge from a season ago.

“We’ve got a great challenge ahead of us; this is a very good football team. They beat us very badly last year, they’re very talented and they present us a lot of problems on offense,” Head Coach Jeff Brohm said.

The offensive threats La. Tech present are no surprise. The Hilltoppers only allowed more points from one team last season in Marshall’s 66, and that game went into overtime.

Yet no defense presented more trouble to WKU last season either. The Bulldogs held an offense that averaged over 40 points a game last season to an abysmal 10 by the Tops.

“They like to get after the quarterback, make him feel uncomfortable and give you a lot of different looks,” Brohm said. “We have to really do our homework and have a good plan and put our players in a position to succeed, and hopefully they can go out and make plays.”

The Bulldogs come to town after a signature victory for the Hilltoppers. Last week, WKU became the first Conference USA team to defeat an SEC opponent since UCF’s win over Georgia in the 2010 Liberty Bowl. WKU is now 3-2 against the SEC since 2012 to go along with two wins over the University of Kentucky.

Despite the victory, what was dubbed by many as “America’s most exciting offense” last season struggled to get going against Vanderbilt.

WKU was shut out in the first half for the first time since 2013, and senior quarterback Brandon Doughty failed to impress.

Yet the WKU coaching staff didn’t seem worried about the senior’s struggles and stressed the importance of taking the season one game at a time.

“Well, I think he’s looking forward to it. You know, [La. Tech last season] was a game where he didn’t play up to par, but really none of us did. He took most of the blame when really it was all of our faults,” Brohm said of Doughty. “You know, I think he’s going to have to play tough … He’s got to be completely sharp, and this is a huge test for him and a huge test for our offense.”

La. Tech, who finished 2014 with a 7-1 conference record and placed first in the C-USA West division, is looking to start its season 2-0 after defeating its first opponent, Southern, 62-15.

A large part of the Bulldogs’ success is due to their explosive spread offense. Led by University of Florida transfer Jeff Driskel, the Bulldogs tallied 558 yards of offense—including five touchdowns by Driskel—in their first outing.

Last season, La. Tech hung 59 points against the Hilltoppers, and it will look to rival the scoring production it had consistently last season. In one contest versus C-USA opponent Rice last season, the Bulldogs scored 76 points.

But WKU is no stranger to offensive shootouts. Last season, the Hilltoppers played in six games where both teams scored more than 35 points.

WKU carries some momentum into week two and will look to continue to keep it going. The Hilltoppers are looking to start 2-0 for the first time since 2005 and will attempt to do so tonight at 7 p.m.

“Just coming off a big game like we had against Vanderbilt, you want to keep it going,” junior safety Marcus Ward said. “So we’ve got the momentum in a sense, but we know that this team is probably going to be the best team we’re going to play all year, so we have to come ready to play. Even though it’s only the second game, we got (sic) to be ready to play because we know they’re going to come ready and come prepared, so we’ve got to do the same.”
WKU defense showing improvement in 2015

BY BILLY RUTLEDGE
HERALD.SPORTS@WKU.EDU

While the WKU football team of 2014 possessed one of the best offensive units in the country, the opposite could be said of the defense.

Defensive coordinator Nick Holt and his unit gave up an average of 39.9 points per game last season and ranked in the bottom third in both passing and rushing defense in the FBS.

But there seems to have been a revitalization of the WKU defense in 2015. The unit has nine defensive starters returning and two standout transfers making a name for themselves just one game into the season.

The Hilltoppers' (1-0) first victory of 2015 came not from their overpowering offense but from their stingy defense, which kept them in a close 14-12 contest.

WKU on the road held Vanderbilt to only three points at halftime and only 393 total yards at fulltime. Cap off the night with three defensive turnovers, and WKU won a type of game that it would have been blown out in last season.

“We knew it was going to happen,” Higbee said. “At the beginning of camp in the spring, we added a few guys to the defense and some young guys getting more experience, and they won [the Vanderbilt game] for us.”

With senior cornerback Prince Charles Iworah, second team All-Conference USA selection senior cornerbcket Wonderful Terry and a pair of junior safeties, the Hilltopper defensive has emerged as a contender for the team's identity.

“IT's been a lot of team work, team effort,” junior receiver Taywan Taylor said. “Everybody has been coming in on the same page and great camaraderie.”

As the Hilltoppers look to strengthen their mentality in the second half, they also realize the importance of playing with a sense of unity.

“We’ve just been wanting to be able to transfer that over to the field and be able to go out and play hard and give it your all on each down.”
The defense still showed some signs for concern last week when it allowed Vanderbilt’s offense five trips to the red zone. Despite showing an ability to get itself into tough situations, though, the defense came up with three crucial plays within its own 20. Linebackers Nick Holt and Nick Newton both pulled in interceptions in WKU’s end zone, and defensive back Joe Brown made a game-sealing, open-field tackle on a two-point conversion late in the fourth. Only time will tell whether the defense will become known for backing itself into corners or for making big plays in big situations.

Brandon Doughty threw for just 209 yards against Vandy—a performance scarcely seen last season. The senior was 19-30 with a touchdown through a linkup with tight end Tyler Higbee. Doughty capitalized on this linkup with Higbee several times during the night as the senior pulled in four catches for 102 yards: 62 yards more than any other member of the Hilltopper receiving core. Junior Taywan Taylor racked up the next-largest number of yards receiving with 40 yards off three receptions. Doughty’s linkups with Higbee proved both crucial and promising, but as for the rest of the receiving core, more variety must be offered to Doughty if the offense wants to reach the same gear it was in last season.

Last year’s high-flying offense proved to be a massive passing threat, but despite Leon Allen putting up 1,542 yards rushing to compliment Doughty’s 4,830 yards passing, the offense lacked real tenacity in the run game and failed to present itself as a running threat in 2014. It’s hard to say the talent wasn’t there, though; more often than not, the defense backed the offense into situations in which the pass game was virtually the only way to victory. The Hilltoppers were the first FBS team with a 1,500-yard runner and a 4,500-yard passer in the same season, but changes are called for if Brohm wants his offense to become a balanced threat.

While the Hilltopper defense made the difference last Thursday against Vanderbilt, tonight’s matchup will surely present a larger challenge to defensive coordinator Nick Holt and his unit. The defense allowed an average of 39.9 points per game last season yet held Vanderbilt to just 12 after two end zone interceptions. The Commodores were held to 393 total offensive yards on the night, but this week the Hilltoppers face a much more potent offense. Louisiana Tech put up 587 yards and 62 points in its win over Southern last weekend—including an average yards gained per play of 9.6. This game will be a much better gauge of how strong the Hilltopper defense is.

Sixth-year senior quarterback Brandon Doughty was the most important aspect of the Hilltopper team last season as both an athlete and a leader. Doughty showed real frustrations in the first half against Vanderbilt; he was shut out for the first time as a starter for the red and white. Yet he showed real composure and leadership in the second half to orchestrate two important drives and grind out a victory for the school he has been a part of since 2009. If the Vanderbilt game is any indication of things to come this season, Doughty will have to continue to show that composure when things aren’t falling in line offensively.
Brown’s transition symbolizes Hilltopper dedication to defense

BY JONAH PHILLIPS
HERALD.SPORTS@WKU.EDU

When Louisville sophomore Joe Brown graduated from Butler High School and made his way to the Hill, he came into the program as a bit of a wild card. He appeared in nine games in 2014 mostly on special teams, but he had been practicing positionally as a running back. Without his spot solidified in the offense, Brown continued to make plays both as a returner and gunner on the special teams squad.

Tonight’s game versus Louisiana Tech marks several unique anniversaries for Brown.

Last season as a freshman, Brown returned five kickoffs for 139 yards. Two of those returns came against Louisiana Tech for a combined 59 yards. While Brown managed to find glimmers of success in a game where WKU was blown out 59-10 last season, the game arguably marked a much more important milestone for Brown.

This marked the first game that Brown officially transitioned to a defensive back. Up to that point, Brown had only managed one run for one yard on the season. But Brown wasn’t as enthusiastic to be a part of the defense as he is now.

“I can’t lie—I was in love with the offense when I came here,” Brown said. “I loved the offense, so when coach Brohm came and spoke to me about it, at first I was on the fence.”

Now as a sophomore, Brown is still acclimating to the defensive side of the ball, but he has already made a big argument for a starting spot in the Hilltopper secondary.

“Once I started to get the hang of it, I got the opportunity to play a lot … and play a really big role for the team,” Brown said. “I just went from there.”

It wasn’t until Brown could visibly see the impact he was making on his team as a whole that he completely embraced the switch to defense.

“He made the game-winning tackle in the open field on a Vanderbilt two-point conversion attempt, sealing his team the victory.

While his open-field tackle in the closing moments of the game was impressive, it was a combination of athleticism and preparedness that allowed Brown to be in the right spot at the right time.

Senior captain linebacker Nick Holt said post-game the play Vanderbilt ran was one WKU was expecting to see in that sort of yardage situation.

“On the two-point conversion, their big tight end … came really flat. We were in man to man, so … I knew from the get-go that I was going to just edge it off,” Brown said. “I knew he was going to throw it, and I just wanted to make a big play for my team.”

Whether he’s on the special teams or on the defense, Brown is looking to make as big an impact as possible. He shows this mentality through his dedication to the transition from offense to defense and his excitement with his team’s display against Vanderbilt.

“This means a lot to my team. We wanted to come down here and make a statement,” Brown said. “[The defense has] been hearing a lot about last year, and we wanted to let everyone know that this is a new team—a better and improved team.”
Vanderbilt results point towards interesting La. Tech matchup

BY JONAH PHILLIPS
HERALD.SPORTS@WKU.EDU

As lackluster as the Hilltoppers' success in Nashville may have been, the Tops will look to take it into tonight's game against a team that completely dominated WKU last season.

The Hilltoppers put forth an unconvincing offensive effort on the road in their season-opener, managing just 246 yards of total offense. But their offensive performance wasn't a complete loss.

Quarterback Brandon Doughty and the offense showed a sense of maturity. After being frustratingly shut out in the first half for the first time since 2013, they evolved in the second half and managed two touchdown-earning drives, which were good enough for the win.

Whether it was Vanderbilt's defense showing up in the first half or WKU's offense showing up late to the game, it took a while for the Hilltopper offense to find its rhythm.

"They were a good defense. Obviously we didn't play as up to par as we would have liked, but we got the W and came out 1 and 0," senior tight end Tyler Higbee, who pulled in the game-winning touchdown, said.

"We weren't playing up to par, and we have excelled before; we know we are better than that," Higbee added. "It was frustrating at times, and you know sometimes you just have to step up and make plays, and that is what we were lacking in the beginning of the game."

Higbee was a bright spot in a less-than-glamorous Hilltopper offense, and his linkup play with Doughty proved the difference in the second half. Higbee recorded four receptions for 102 yards and a touchdown, including a 65-yard reception that breathed life into a stagnant offense.

Doughty said the key to success in the second half was keeping calm in the face of adversity and sticking to what the team knew they could accomplish.

"It was frustrating. We just had to stick to the game plan and really execute ... We had a lot of guys who were having their first time really getting into the fire and against an SEC team," Doughty said. "They had to settle down, and I think they did. We just got back to the game plan, got back to what we were doing, and it slowed down a little bit for us in the second half."

While the offense will certainly look to make large-scale improvements for tonight's game, the defense will look to build off its staunch performance against an SEC opponent on the road.

No one can deny the defense kept the Hilltoppers in contention throughout the game, and that kind of pressure is foreign to a defense that struggled to stay on the field in 2014.

"We didn't think about that too much. We just go out there and do our thing. We knew our offense was going to score points—put some points on the board. We just needed to go out there, execute, fly around and have fun, and we had fun tonight," senior linebacker Nick Holt said. "I think that is part of the reason we played so well. We were having a lot of fun playing together."

Now the question arises as to whether WKU—a team that looked shaky at best in its win last week—can take that win and build on it going up against Louisiana Tech, a team that defeated WKU 59-10 last year.

If WKU is to enter the contest with any momentum at all, La. Tech, who won 62-15 in its season opener last week against Southern University, will match that momentum.

WKU was held to 246 yards of total offense versus Vanderbilt, and La. Tech held Southern to 281 yards of total offense. Yardage-wise, Southern was more productive than the Hilltoppers last week, and they still lost by 47 points.

But the WKU defense has strengthened since the two teams clashed last season. This game, then, has the potential to bring much more excitement than last year's blowout.

If the Hilltoppers can muster a win, they will be 2-0 for the first time since 2005.
Doughty’s stat sheet for the Vandy game isn’t going to wow anyone. 19-for-30 with 209 yards and a touchdown is not in the same league with what Doughty is capable of. While the numbers struggled to present themselves, his leadership didn’t. At times, Doughty was visibility frustrated with his unit, yet he came out composed in the second half and made big plays. Look for Doughty to remain composed in his position of leadership tonight and to get the best out of his unit.

Brown began his freshman season in 2014 as a running back, but he quickly made a name for himself on special teams. After the shift, he became a player that saw regular minutes. He had tackles on both defense and special teams against Vandy, including a game-winning tackle in the open field. Look for Brown to continue to emerge as a playmaker on defense and special teams.

While the Hilltopper offense looked lackluster all night, Allen looked as if he was running with a purpose any time he touched the ball. 60 yards and a touchdown off of 15 carries isn’t going to wow anyone, but the tenacity Allen showed on the ball last week was inspiring to the rest of the offensive unit. Look for Allen to run around a Bulldog tonight, and possibly run over a few more.

Last week Holt was tied for the second-most tackles on the team with seven—four of them solo tackles. The senior captain also came up with the Hilltoppers’ first big interception of the night in their own end zone, and his command of the defensive unit allowed the Commodores points on just two of their five red zone trips. Look for Holt to continue to evolve as a pinnacle leader in the WKU defense.

The transfer from UAB commanded the middle of the field against Vandy. He pulled in a team high of eight tackles—five of them solo. Not only did McCollum prove he can thrive under Nick Holt’s system, but he also showed an ability to comfortably communicate with his new teammates on the field in-game. Look for McCollum’s nose for the ball to continue to show tonight.

Jeff Driskel (La Tech)
Senior Quarterback
6’4 | 231
University of Florida

Despite playing in just 25 minutes of the Bulldogs’ contest against Southern, Driskel threw for 274 yards with a nation-leading passing efficiency of 321.4 as he went 12-for-15. Driskel showed the ability to be cerebral in his play. Look for Driskel to make big plays in the pass game.

The Bulldogs rushed for 221 yards against Southern University last week with eight players getting touches. Dixon rushed for nearly half of Louisiana Tech’s total output with 107 with an average of 11.8 yards per touch, so look for him to put up numbers tonight.

Taylor was a nightmare for the Hilltopper defense when the teams met last season, pulling in nine receptions for a team-high 113 yards and three touchdowns. With five players pulling in receiving touchdowns for La. Tech last week and 12 players grabbing a reception, look for Louisiana Tech’s passing game to be active.
TOPPER TRANSIT SHUTTER STOP ● FULLY EQUIPPED FITNESS CENTER ● BIKE SHARE

FREE WIRELESS ● SHORT WALK TO CAMPUS ● FREE PARKING ● NEWLY RENOVATED CLUBHOUSE

1909 Creason Street, Bowling Green
270.846.1000 ● www.cevillages.com

TEXT "LIVEBIGWKU" TO 47464
@CEBOWLINGGREEN