1999

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**Toppers look for better pitching, D**

*WKU baseball team to open its season vs. Xavier*

By JASON FRANKES

The Daily News

Western Kentucky University junior third baseman Matt Idlett offered a bit of solace for Hilltopper baseball fans tired of four-hour games that routinely finish up in sub-freezing temperatures.

"This year, they're going to be preconditioned around pitching and defense," Idlett said. "The first two years I was here, we played for the three-run home run and the big inning. I think this team is more focused on shutting teams down and manufacturing runs."

"I think you'll see more 4-3 games instead of 17-16. People say they like offense. It's fun to watch. But I don't think they'll have to stay here four hours quite as often." Idlett and his baseball teammates will get to test that theory today when Western opens its season against Xavier.

Today's doubleheader begins at noon at Nick Denes Western Field. The Hilltoppers open their 1998 season today with a doubleheader against Xavier.

Western is coming off a 26-27 campaign last year in which the squad fell into its normal slide of good hitting and bad pitching. While Western ranked a respectable fifth in the Sun Belt with a .304 batting average, the Hilltoppers were eighth in pitching with a team ERA of 5.03. While some may not view the fact that Western returns 10 of its 11 pitchers from last season as a positive, Hilltopper coach Joel Murrie does.

"I like our pitching staff," said Murrie, who enters his 10th season as Western's head coach. "I feel they have ability and experience. Most of them have been pitching since they were freshmen and have had some success."

"The thing about this staff is that it has some depth. In the past, we've always been strong at the top but dropped off in the middle and long relief. This year, I don't think we'll drop off that much, if any."

Junior right-hander Stephen Stemle is the top returning hurler and will get one of the two starting nod s today's doubleheader. Stemle was the lone Hilltopper with a sub-3.00 ERA last season, compiling a 7-4 record with a 3.89 ERA.

Josh Novotney (0-4, 5.61), who missed most of last season with an injury, is the other projected starter today. He was the leading reliever Smith (4-8, 5.67 ERA) could get the start.

See Toppers, 3B

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**Toppers**

Sunday if he is not used in relief today.

Coral Jugglers (1-2, 5.08 ERA) and Ryan Forrest (6-3, 8.87) are among the other top returnees on the pitching staff. Murrie said freshmen Ryan Hutchinson, who will also see time at third base, will be counted on for several innings this season.

"We expect him to really make an impact on our pitching staff," Murrie said. "He has a live arm and is very aggressive on the mound."

On the offensive side, Western lost four of its top six hitters from last year, including first-team all-Sun Belt performers Josh Patton and Erick Rosa.

Center fielder Lorenzo Ferguson returns as the only Hilltopper to start every game last season. Ferguson led Western in stolen bases last season with 14 and brings back a .339 batting average.

Idlett (.324, 22 RBIs) will replace Patton at third base after playing left field last season. Idlett missed 18 games last season with an injured wrist and shoulder but says he's 100 percent this season.

"He's the most versatile player on our team," Murrie said. "He's our leader with action more so than words."

Andre Priza (.193) and Kevin Chatier (.273) will platoon at catcher, replacing Rosa. Bowling Green High School graduate T.J. Freeman (.208) and junior college all-America Anthony Saporito will share first base and designated hitter duties.

Murrie has a trio of newcomers -- Ryan Miller, Luis Rodriguez and Brian Houdek -- who will see action at both middle infield spots. Houdek will also see time as a pitcher.

Left fielders Jeff Vance (.369) and right fielder Chris Yeo, a freshman from Canada, will join Ferguson in the outfield.

After opening the season at home this weekend, Western will travel to Troy State next weekend before visiting nationally ranked Florida.

Ferguson hopes the tough early schedule will have Western ready for play in the Sun Belt, whose coaches picked the Hilltoppers to finish tied for eighth this season.

"We use it as motivation," Ferguson said. "We see how other coaches look at us. We're out here trying to do the same things as all of those other teams -- get as many wins as possible."
Short stops
A quick look at what’s happening
in the world of sports

Hilltoppers fall at
home to Indians

The Western Kentucky University baseball team dropped
the first game of a doubleheader
with Sun Belt Conference rival
Arkansas State on Saturday, losing 22-7.

Hilltopper first baseman T.J. Freeman led Western Kentucky
with three hits in the game.

Information on Saturday’s second game was unavailable.

Western Kentucky will wrap up
its three-game series with the
Indians with a 1 p.m. game today
at Nick Denes Field.

Arkansas State 000 204 790 – 22 21 2
Western Kentucky 201 000 121 – 7 16 2
WP – Dobson (4-5), LP – Barrios (2-4).
Short stops

A quick look at what's happening in the world of sports.

Freeman's hot bat helps Tops to victory

The Western Kentucky University baseball team salvaged a Sun Belt Conference three-game series with an 8-7 victory Sunday over visiting Arkansas State.

On Saturday, Arkansas State (18-12) took both games of a doubleheader from the Hilltoppers.

In Sunday's game, Western Kentucky (14-16) got three RBIs from first baseman T.J. Freeman. Chris Yoo had three hits and an RBI and Matt Illeit homered for Western Kentucky.

The Hilltoppers will be back in action on Tuesday at Vanderbilt for a 7 p.m. game.

Saturday
Arkansas State 4 12 0
Western Kentucky 1 5 7 0
WP - Delco Kiley (2-11, 4-40)
SV - Matt Fanch (1)

Sunday
Arkansas State 2 4 2 3
Western Kentucky 7 3
WP - Brian Houdek (2-1)
H-P - Jeff Vance (12)
Freeman’s hot bat helps Tops to victory

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Saturday
Arkansas State 0 0 0 1 4 6 12 0
Western Kentucky 1 0 0 1 5 7 0
WP - Brant Kelly (5-1); LP - Josh Novotny (2-4). BV - Matt Ferrell (1).

Sunday
Arkansas State 2 3 0 0 0 2 0 1 0 3
Western Kentucky 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 8 1
WP - Stan Houdek (5-1); LP - Sandy Farrell (1); SV - Jeff Wade (1).
Josh Novotney, a Western Kentucky sophomore pitcher, has been selected as the Sun Belt Conference Pitcher of the Week for his performance in a 3-2 win Saturday.

Pitching in the second game of a doubleheader against Arkansas-Little Rock, he hurled 13 strikeouts and gave up no walks in a seven-inning complete game.

Novotney was Western Kentucky's last pitcher to claim Sun Belt Pitcher of the Week honors in 1995. He returned to the Hilltoppers' lineup after being redshirted his sophomore season.
Ex-Purple hits Western to win

By JEFF NATIONS
The Daily News

Although he's not jaded with the activity yet, Western Kentucky University junior first baseman T.J. Freeman is getting used to hitting the big home run late in the game for the Hilltoppers.

Freeman, a Bowling Green High School graduate, did it again Wednesday night. His two-out, one strike homer with two runners on lifted Western Kentucky from a one-run deficit to a 6-4 victory over visiting Austin Peay at Nick Dunes Field.

"I was just trying to put the ball in play," Freeman said. "With one strike on me, I was hoping for a single or a double, at best."

Instead, Freeman sent a soaring shot over the center field wall off the Governors' left-handed relief pitcher George Sherrill. The home run was Freeman's third in the ninth inning this season. Freeman had game-tying homers against Troy State and Arkansas-Little Rock earlier this season. Western Kentucky eventually won both of those games.

For the game, Freeman was 3-for-5 with three RBIs and extended his hitting streak to 17 games. Freeman has hit seven home runs this season.

"Obviously, he's done it on several occasions," Western Kentucky baseball coach Joel Murrie said. "I wouldn't say he's the only one, but certainly when his time has come up he's contributed. It was Chris Yeoo against Kentucky, last week it was Anthony Saporito, the list goes on and on."

Western Kentucky sophomore center fielder led off the ninth with an infield single, but Jeff Vance hit into a fielder's choice. With Vance on first, Hilltopper junior second baseman Matt Idlett hit a routine grounder to the shortstop, setting up a perfect double play opportunity. But Governors' second baseman Greg Troy dropped the flipped ball from Billy Mortimer, allowing both runners to reach safely. Austin Peay still almost got away with a win after freshman outfilder Chris Yeo lined out to right field and Idlett almost got doubled up getting back to first base.

"We gave them four extra outs in the ninth inning," Austin Peay coach Gary McClure said. "We had a double play at first base but he dropped the ball. The game should have been over before that, but our second baseman drops the ball. You can't win that way. You can't give the other team extra outs."

McClure also thought his team had gotten Vance on a pickoff play in the ninth inning. Sherrill's move bordered on a balk, and while McClure was arguing that Vance was out, Murrie was on the field lobbying for a balk call.

"I think one of the most difficult calls a two-man umpiring crew can make is the balk call," Murrie said. "I wasn't that upset that it wasn't called, I do think their pitcher had gone to extreme limits in pushing the rules."

Freeman's shot got Western Kentucky starting pitcher Brian Smith off the hook. Smith was chased after Austin Peay's three-run fifth inning rally. Vance, a left-hander, came on in relief, Brian Houdek worked the top of the ninth to earn his third win of the season.

"I made some mistakes — that was my fault," said Smith, a senior right-hander who broke Western Kentucky's career appearances mark this season. "I just made some bad pitches, and they took advantage."

The Hilltoppers held a 2-1 lead after the second inning on Idlett's two-run single and scored in the bottom of the fifth on Yeoo's line drive home run down the right field line.

Western Kentucky has won five straight games. The Hilltoppers will be at Middle Tennessee State for a 7 p.m. game.

Austin Peay 6

Western Kentucky 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3

1 1 1 3

WP - Brian Houdek (3-2). LP - George Sherrill (0-7).

-- Reviewed by: JEFF NATIONS --
Hilltoppers take two at SBC power South Alabama

By the Daily News

MOBILE, Ala. — The odds were seemingly stacked against Western Kentucky University’s baseball team heading to South Alabama this weekend.

Entering the series, the Jaguars held a 32-7 advantage over the Hilltoppers at Eddie Stanky Field. The winner of the last two Sun Belt Conference Tournament championships, the Jaguars entered the weekend atop the Sun Belt standings and ranked No. 16 in the nation.

All of that didn’t matter. Josh Novotney pitched a complete-game four-hitter, retiring 18 straight batters at one point, to lead the Hilltoppers to an 8-3 win over the Jaguars (32-12 overall, 14-5 Sun Belt) on Sunday.

"Josh had them eating out of his hand," Hilltopper baseball coach Joel Mummie said.

Chris Yoo hit a grand slam home run in the third, giving the Hilltoppers the only runs they would need.

The win helped Western (22-19, 10-10) take two of three during the weekend series.

In 14 all-time series at South Alabama, this weekend marked only the second time Western has won a series in Mobile, Ala.

Novotney’s complete game was the second straight for Western, which has won seven of its last eight games. Steve Stemple tossed a complete-game three-hitter in Saturday’s second game as Western won 2-0.

**Sun Belt baseball standings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Sun Belt</th>
<th>Overall</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Alabama</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>22-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>4-4</td>
<td>30-14-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>11-2</td>
<td>21-20-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas State</td>
<td>10-4</td>
<td>23-16-3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacksonville</td>
<td>7-10</td>
<td>20-18-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Kentucky</td>
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<td>20-16-1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texas A&amp;M</td>
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<td>20-10-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Alabama</td>
<td>0-0</td>
<td>0-0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WP - Mike Fischer (6-1) LP - Ryan Hutchinson (0-2) Save - Randy McArdle (4).
WKU pitcher wins conference award

Western Kentucky University junior pitcher Steve Stemle became the second consecutive Hilltoppers’ hurler to win Sun Belt Conference Pitcher of the Week honors after being selected on Monday.

Stemle threw in the second game of a doubleheader against 15th-ranked South Alabama on Saturday. Stemle struck out 10 batters in eight innings, surrendering only one walk to earn the win in the Hilltoppers’ 2-0 extra-inning victory.

Stemle is currently ranked in the top 10 in several Sun Belt baseball categories, including strikeouts (9th with 68 Ks), strikeouts per nine innings (3rd with 10.20), complete games (4th with two) and opponent’s batting average (7th with .248).
Baseball Tops win on the road, 5-4

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Western Kentucky University's Jeff Vance drove in a pair of runs to help his team to a 5-4 victory on Thursday over homestanding Middle Tennessee State.

Vance, who started at designated hitter and later pitched for the Hilltoppers, turned in a 2-for-3 night at the plate.

Western Kentucky second baseman Matt Idlett drove in a run and catcher Kevin Clutter had a sacrifice fly RBI.

Ryan Ferrell started and got the win for the Hilltoppers, going six and one-third innings. Crad Jaggers got the final two outs to record his second save.

Western Kentucky (24-19) will be back in action on Saturday, taking on Sun Belt Conference foe Louisiana Tech in Ruston, La. The first game of a scheduled double-header is set for a 2 p.m. start.

Western Kentucky 3 10 0 2 0 0 0 0 5 4
Middle Tennessee 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 0 3
WP - Ryan Ferrell (2-1), LP - Brian Paris (1-2), SV - Crad Jaggers (2).
Hot baseball Toppers hit the road

Apr 25, 1998

By the Daily News

Western Kentucky University’s baseball team will open a three-game series at Louisiana Tech today with hopes of continuing its hot play of late.

Winners of nine of their last 10 games, the Hilltoppers (24-19 overall, 10-10 Sun Belt Conference) face Louisiana Tech (17-27, 6-14) in a doubleheader today at 2 p.m. The third game of the series is set for 1 p.m. Sunday.

Western is coming off a surprising 2-1 series win at conference leader South Alabama last weekend and has since knocked off Vanderbilt and Middle Tennessee State earlier this week. Western’s series win at South Alabama was just its second ever in 13 all-time series in Mobile, Ala.

“If we don’t play well in Ruston, it doesn’t matter what we did in Mobile,” Hilltopper coach Joel Murr said. “We’re in the race, and Louisiana Tech is probably out of it right now. You’ll find anything you can to motivate your team, so they’re probably saying, ‘If we can’t make it, let’s make sure Western doesn’t go.’ If we take them lightly, we can make their season.’”

Western needs to move up one spot to qualify for the Sun Belt Conference Tournament scheduled for May 13-16 in Mobile, Ala. Only the top six teams in the qualify, Western has not competed in the Sun Belt Tournament since 1992.

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Sun Belt baseball standings

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<tr>
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<td>.737</td>
<td>22-13</td>
<td>.600</td>
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<td>14-5</td>
<td>.455</td>
<td>24-13</td>
<td>.625</td>
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<td>18-7</td>
<td>.733</td>
<td>25-13</td>
<td>.667</td>
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<td>10-9</td>
<td>.526</td>
<td>24-16</td>
<td>.600</td>
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<td>.674</td>
<td>27-16</td>
<td>.633</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Kentucky</td>
<td>10-10</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>24-19</td>
<td>.556</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louisiana Tech</td>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>17-27</td>
<td>.391</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adk. Little Rock</td>
<td>4-16</td>
<td>.200</td>
<td>14-32</td>
<td>.281</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Friday’s games

Arkansas State at Texas-Pan American (DH), 4 p.m.
Southwestern Louisiana at South Alabama, 6:30 p.m.

Saturday’s games

Lincoln at Jackson (DH), 12:30 p.m.
Arkansas State at Texas-Pan American, 1 p.m.
Arkansas Little Rock at New Orleans (DH), 1 p.m.
Southwestern Louisiana at South Alabama, 1 p.m.
Western Kentucky at Louisiana Tech (DH), 2 p.m.

Sunday’s games

Lincoln at Jackson, 11 a.m.
Western Kentucky at Louisiana Tech, 1 p.m.
Arkansas Little Rock at New Orleans, 1 p.m.
Another twin killing Apr. 29, 1998

UK shortstop Andy Green completes one of four Wildcat double plays as Western Kentucky University's Jeff Vance slides into second base. The Hilltoppers lost 13-3. (Story, Page 3B.)
Toppers suffer 'embarrassing' 13-3 loss to UK

By JASON FRAKES

Western Kentucky University baseball coach Joel Murrie and his team have much more important battles awaiting them this weekend than the one they encountered Tuesday night.

With a season-ending series against Sun Belt Conference foe Southwestern Louisiana set for this weekend at Nick Denes Field, the Hilltoppers' postseason hopes ride on a trio of upcoming games.

Still, Murrie knows that for many fans, the only game that really matters comes once a season against Kentucky.

That's what made Tuesday's 13-3 loss to the Wildcats so disappointing.

"We were very flat tonight," Murrie said. "It's unfortunate considering we went to Lexington (April 14) and played 11 great innings (in an 8-6 win).

"It's only one game out of 55 or 56 that we'll play this year, but a lot of fans only care about this one game a year. That's what makes it a little embarrassing."

Perhaps more embarrassing for Western (26-21) on Tuesday was that its pitchers couldn't get the ball across the plate. Five Hilltopper hurlers combined to walk 11 Wildcat batters and hit two more in a game that dragged along and lasted three hours and 15 minutes.

"I don't think there was anything wrong with our arms; we just weren't mentally ready tonight," said Western pitcher T.J. Johnson, who walked two and hit another in three innings of work. "It doesn't make sense either because Kentucky is a big state rivalry."

Two walks by starting pitcher Ryan Ferrell keyed the Wildcats' four-run first inning that proved to be all they would need.

Western Kentucky University baseball coach Joel Murrie (right) argues a call with the home plate umpire during the sixth inning of Tuesday's game against Kentucky at Nick Denes Field. Kentucky won 13-3.

Western pulled within 4-1 in the second on one of two RBI singles by Tony Saporito, but left the bases loaded. The Hilltoppers left seven Eastern Kentucky and Thursday versus Murray State. Those games precede this weekend's big conference series.

"We need to come out these next two games and go into this weekend on a positive note," Johnson said.

"We didn't throw strikes, and we weren't very solid at the plate," Murrie said. "We had a couple of opportunities to get back in the game, but they just pulled away there after the first inning."
WKU baseball looking to qualify for tourney

By JASON FRAKES
The Daily News

Western Kentucky University junior Steve Stemle has waited three seasons to pitch in a meaningful, end-of-season series. He'll finally get his chance today.

Western's baseball team will host Southwestern Louisiana in a doubleheader at 2 p.m. today at Nick Denes Field. The three-game series is scheduled to conclude Sunday with a single game at 1 p.m.

This weekend marks the last in Sun Belt Conference regular-season play, and the Hilltoppers (26-21 overall, 12-11 Sun Belt) are fighting for a spot in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament to be held May 13-16 at South Alabama.

"There's definitely some extra excitement there, but we're all trying to keep our emotions in check," Stemle said. "We know we've got a job to do."

If Western can win two of this weekend's games, it would assure itself of its first trip to the Sun Belt Conference Tournament since 1992. Only the top six teams in the conference qualify for the postseason tournament.

The Hilltoppers are all alone in sixth place entering today's play, one-half game behind No. 5 Arkansas State (27-17, 12-10) and one-half game ahead of No. 7 Jacksonville (28-21, 12-12).

Western can still finish anywhere from third to seventh in the final regular-season standings.

"Right now, I'm looking ahead to the opportunity of moving up in the standings more than anything else," Hilltopper coach Joel Murrie said. "We have a good chance of moving up to fourth or third, which is a lot higher than the ninth place the coaches in the conference picked us." Murrie will place Stemle (5-4, 5.21 ERA) on the mound in the first game and come back with ace Josh Novotney (5-4, 3.46 ERA) in the second. Novotney and Stemle were back-to-back winners of the Sun Belt Pitcher of the Week award earlier this month.

Novotney hopes he and Stemle can take the pressure off the team by winning both games today.

"We definitely want to go for two right of the bat," Novotney said. "That would make sure Sunday doesn't mean so much."

Bowling Green High School graduate T.J. Freeman continues to lead Western in hitting with a .388 clip. Novotney said Freeman's bat has contributed greatly as the Hilltoppers have won 11 of their last 14 games.

"Plus, we're playing good defense, which has been the key to it all," Novotney said.
Western falls in opener of series vs. USL

By the Daily News

Fighting for a spot in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament, Western Kentucky University's baseball team lost 9-3 to Southwestern Louisiana on Saturday in the first game of their three-game series at Nick Denes Field.

The second game of the scheduled doubleheader was postponed by rain with the Ragin' Cajuns leading 4-1 in the top of the third inning.

The two teams will finish that seven-inning game today, beginning at 1 p.m. The third and final game, a nine-inning contest, will follow today.

Western (26-22 overall, 12-12 Sun Belt Conference) entered Saturday's play all alone in sixth place in the conference standings. The top six teams in the conference advance to the Sun Belt Tournament scheduled for May 13-16 at the University of South Alabama's Eddie Stanky Field in Mobile.

Western could assure itself a spot in the tournament with two victories today. The results of Saturday's other Sun Belt Conference contests were unavailable.

In Saturday's first game, the Ragin' Cajuns (33-18, 16-7) used a five-run burst in the fifth inning to take control of the game. Kevin Cantrelle's grand-slam home run with two outs was the big blow of the inning.

Western battled to within 5-3 with single runs in both the fifth and sixth innings but could get no closer.

B.J. Ryan led Southwestern Louisiana at the plate with three hits, including a home run. and added three RBIs.

Matt Idrict had three hits to lead the Hilltoppers at the plate. Idrict and Luis Rodriguez had Western's only RBIs in the game.

Steve Stemle dropped to 5-5 with the loss.

Western Kentucky's Brian Houdek swings away during the Hilltoppers 9-3 loss to Southwestern Louisiana on Saturday at Nick Denes Field.
Two baseball Tops honored by Sun Belt

By the Daily News

Although Western Kentucky University’s baseball team was shut out of the post-season Sun Belt Conference tournament, two Hilltoppers were played well enough in the regular season to win post-season honors.

Freeman, picked to while Hilltopper junior second baseman Matt Idlett was picked for the Sun Belt’s second team.

For the season, Freeman hit .379 with 49 RBIs; 69 hits and 13 stolen bases. Freeman ranked fifth in the Sun Belt in batting average and seventh in RBIs. Freeman’s 20 doubles during the season ranked him in a tie for first in that category.

Idlett was nearly as impressive, hitting .328 with 10 home runs and 45 RBIs for Western Kentucky.

South Alabama’s Justin Carter, a junior lefthanded pitcher, was tabbed as the conference Newcomer of the Year.

Lamar third baseman Wes Koch was selected as Coach of the Year for leading the Jaguars to the Sun Belt championship and a No. 17 national ranking.
Hilltoppers will host three baseball camps

Western Kentucky University will host three summer baseball camps at Nick Denes Field in June.

The purpose of each camp is to provide basic fundamental instruction for every player who attends.

Individual instruction will be given to each camp in specific areas such as hitting, pitching, fielding and baserunning. Specialized drills will be implemented to develop performance, and games will be played to enhance team play and instincts needed to be a successful player.

Session I, a little league camp for ages 9-12, will run June 1-5 from 9:30 a.m. to noon. Cost is $85 in advance and $95 the day of camp.

Session II, a hitting camp for ages 13 to 1998 high school graduates, will be conducted June 8-10 from 9 a.m. to noon. Cost is $60 in advance and $70 the day of camp.

Session III, a pee wee camp for ages 6-8, will run June 8-10 from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Cost is $45 in advance and $55 the day of camp.

For more information call 502-745-6023 or 502-745-3542.
Greenwood High School senior Timmy Freeman (right) on Wednesday signed a national letter of intent to play his collegiate baseball for Western Kentucky University. At left is Greenwood baseball coach Chris Decker.

'Tops sign Freeman

By JENNIFER SEIGER
The Daily News

Greenwood High School senior Timmy Freeman showed promise on the baseball field at an early age. It paid off Wednesday.

Freeman, a center fielder, signed a national letter-of-intent to play collegiately for Western Kentucky University. He is the second baseball player from Greenwood to sign with a Division I program and the fourth since last year to sign with a college.

A starter on the Gators' varsity team since the eighth grade, Freeman stands to own quite a few career records by the time his high school playing days are done. He is first in stolen bases with 42; second in hits (110), RBIs (70), runs scored (55), doubles (23), triples (four), home runs (14), at-bats (326) and walks (43); and third in slugging percentage at .530.

"The thing that stands out the most is his dedication," said Gators coach Chris Decker, who also coached Freeman's middle school basketball and football teams.

Freeman graciously thanked his parents, family, teammates and friends for their support and Western coach Joel Murrie for providing him with the opportunity to play on the college level. But when he got to Decker, it was an emotional Freeman who expressed his gratitude to the man who had coached him since seventh grade.

"I think he had confidence in me from the get-go," Freeman said. "Sometimes I didn't think I was good as I'd like, but he saw past that."

Likewise with Murrie. Freeman has shared a friendship with Murrie's son, Jason, since age 6.

"I think he's always been loyal to Western and he's always had a desire to go to Western," Murrie said. "That means a lot to me when someone wants to be a part of our program, as opposed to someone who has the ability to be a part of our program."

Freeman joins Franklin-Simpson shortstop-pitcher Matthew Wilhite, who signed with the Hilltoppers on Tuesday.

Wilhite has 91 career hits, 60 RBIs and 72 runs scored. He has a 1.3-5 record and two saves on the mound, including 156 strikeouts and a career-low 0.55 ERA in 1997. Last season, he carried a 2.22 ERA, .910 fielding percentage and had a career-high .382 batting average.

"I've seen him perform in pressure situations and I think the more you've been around Matthew, the more you see what he can do as a ballplayer," Murrie said.

"Matthew is one of the best kids I've ever had, as far as work ethic and character," Franklin-Simpson coach Greg Shelton said.

Wilhite and Freeman will be reunited with Greenwood graduate George Cole and Franklin-Simpson graduate/Lindsey Wilson College transfer Justin Lawrence when they make the trek to the Hill. All four were part of last summer's American Legion state champion Kentucky Colonels' 17- and 18-year-old baseball team.

Another likely prospect, outfielder Kendall Withers of two-time defending state champion Harrison County, confirmed Wednesday he had not yet signed with the Hilltoppers. Withers has 32 career home runs, 138 RBIs and a .418 batting average.

Blanton signs with Kentucky

Shelton confirmed Wednesday that power pitcher Joseph Blanton, who transferred from Edmonson County to Franklin-Simpson this year, signed with the University of Kentucky.
Western Kentucky sets baseball slate

By JEFF NATIONS
The Daily News

Western Kentucky University’s baseball season might be influenced more by who’s not on the schedule than who is when the team begins the 1999 season in February.

The school released the Hilltoppers’ schedule on Tuesday and unlike in past seasons, Western will not open with a perennial Top 25 Southeastern Conference power. Instead, the Hilltoppers open with a three-game series against defending Missouri Valley Conference champion Illinois State starting Feb. 19.

“There’s nothing like the thrill of walking into a stadium with 6,000 or 7,000 people in the stands,” Western baseball coach Joel Murrie said. “My guys have been lucky enough to experience that for the past few years playing against schools like LSU, Florida and Ole Miss. On the other hand, what about the thrill of opening up at home and having a chance to get off to a great start?”

In truth, Murrie would have liked to continue the Hilltoppers’ tradition of opening against tough opposition on the road. Western had originally scheduled a three-game series at traditional power Mississippi State, but the addition of Florida International to the Sun Belt Conference forced Murrie to make last-minute changes.

“I had to drop three games from the schedule at that point,” Murrie said. “I could drop three home games against traditional rivals like Louisville, Eastern Kentucky or Vanderbilt, or I could drop the three opening games.”

“All in the past we only played 27 conference games. Now we’re up to 33, so there’s an increase of six right there.”

Entering his 20th season as the Hilltoppers’ head coach, Murrie still likes this season’s schedule.

“We open up with Illinois State, so right out of the chute we’re playing a club that had an outstanding 1998 season,” he said. “It seems like the next weekend we jump into conference play. Really, there’s not a weak link on the schedule.”
Western baseball to open season against Illinois St.
By JEFF NATIONS
Western Kentucky University senior second baseman Matt Idlett doesn’t like to think about the way last season ended for the Hilltoppers.

Heading into the final three-game series against Sun Belt Conference rival Southwestern Louisiana, the Hilltoppers had a chance to make a trip to the conference tournament for the first time since 1992. Two or three wins in the series, and Western Kentucky was guaranteed a spot in the field.

But even with the homefield advantage, the Hilltoppers couldn’t take a game against the Ragin’ Cajuns and once again missed out on the postseason.

“It’s frustrating,” said Idlett, who was a first-team All-Sun Belt Conference pick as a third baseman last year. But even with that spot locked up, Idlett thinks his team has plenty of talent to succeed.

“We just needed to win two games, but we ran into a hot team in that series. And Western Kentucky is assured of a spot in the Sun Belt tournament this year — all eight conference schools will participate in the double-elimination tournament this year.”

Western Kentucky is assured of a spot in the Sun Belt Tournament this season — all eight conference schools will participate in the double-elimination tournament this year. But even with that spot locked up, Idlett thinks his team has plenty to shoot for this season after being picked to finish sixth in the preseason coaches’ poll despite returning eight starters from last year’s 27-24 squad.

“We’re playing for respect in the conference,” Idlett said. “We’re also playing for a top seed in the conference tournament. Without one of the top seeds, it makes the road tough in the tournament.”

With Idlett and fellow All-Sun Belt first-team pick T.J. Freeman headlining the Hilltoppers’ experienced returnees, Western Kentucky coach Joel Murrie is expecting big things from his team. Besides an offense that averaged 6.6 runs a game last year, Murrie likes the way his team’s defense has been looking in practice this season.

And defense the Hilltoppers will need, especially in the early part of the season. That’s because of the few losses Western Kentucky did take from last year’s team, no area was harder hit than the pitching staff. Last year’s ace pitcher Steve Stemple was taken in the fifth round of the major league draft, while career appearance leader Brian Smith graduated and solid reliever Crad Jaggers left school to pursue a football career.

That leaves junior Josh Novotney to anchor the staff. After holding opposing batters to a .236 batting average last season (second in the Sun Belt), Novotney is ready to take on the added responsibility of staff ace.

“I think I pretty much faced everyone’s No. 1 starter last year, so I’m not expecting much to be different,” said Novotney, a right-hander who went 5-5 with a team-best 3.70 ERA last season.

“I think we’re probably going to be in the middle of the pack with our pitching, so our hitting will have to carry us. We’ve got a few young guys who are going to have to come through.”

Murrie has penciled in sophomore right-handers Brian Hoadley and Ryan Hutchison as his next two starters, and junior transfer right-hander Kevin Love has the inside track on the fourth spot in the rotation. A potential wild card could be sophomore right-hander Gino Sadowski, who missed all of last season with a rotator-cuff injury. Hilltopper pitching coach Clyde Keller reports Sadowski as the team’s third baseman with a fastball reaching 87 mph.

“Hopefully, I’ll just miss this week, depending on what the doctor says.”

The only position player lost from last season’s starting lineup is at catcher, where Murrie must replace Andres Prada. Junior Kevin Clutter will take over that spot.

Senior Anthony Saporito holds down the third base job, while sophomore shortstop Luis Rodriguez joins Idlett to form a solid defensive combo in the middle of the infield. In Freeman’s absence, junior Aaron Fogleyong will start at first base. JUCO Curtis Bliss, a catcher, will serve as the team’s primary designated hitter.

The entire starting outfield of Matt Fox, Lorenzo Ferguson and Chris Yoo also returns for the Hilltoppers.

“The strength of our club will vary,” Murrie said. “If we put Josh Novotney on the mound, then on that day our strength will be pitching and defense. On days when we have less experienced pitchers, our strength will be our hitting.”

While Murrie maintains his team’s ultimate goal is winning the Sun Belt and advancing to the NCAA Tournament, he has set a more modest one to reach first.

“My goal is for our club to come out and play with our ability every day, consistently,” Murrie said. “If we can do that, I believe we’ll have a lot of success.”
Western Kentucky University sophomore outfielder Matt Fox slides past Illinois State catcher Ryan Duncheon to score the Hilltoppers’ first run of the game on Saturday at Nick Denes Field. The Redbirds won 9-4 in extra innings.

**Redbirds defeat Western 9-4**

*By the Daily News*

Illinois State exploded for five runs in the top of the 10th inning to defeat Western Kentucky University 9-4 in the Hilltoppers’ baseball opener Saturday at Nick Denes Field.

After trying the game in the second inning, Western (0-1) jumped out to a 4-2 lead in the bottom of the third. But following five scoreless innings, Illinois State put two runs on the board in the top of the ninth inning to send the game into extra innings.

Western junior Josh Novotney pitched eight innings, allowing just two earned runs while striking out seven.

Hilltopper sophomore Matt Fox was the most productive hitter for Western with a 3-for-4 performance that included one RBI. Teammate Lorenzo Ferguson added a home run.

Illinois State outhit the Hilltoppers 12-10.

Western hosts Illinois State today at 2 p.m.

**Hilltoppers get first baseball win of year**

Western Kentucky University picked up its first baseball win of the season Sunday with a 9-4 victory over visiting Illinois State.

Senior right fielder Chris Yeo and senior third baseman Tony Saporito each homered and drove in a pair of runs for the Hilltoppers, who trailed 2-0 before going ahead for good with five runs in the fifth inning.

Junior designated hitter Curtis Bliss was 2-for-4 with an RBI. Junior catcher Kevin Clutter and sophomore shortstop Luis Rodriguez also drove in runs for Western (1-1).

Sophomore righthander Ryan Hutchison worked 7 2/3 innings and struck out seven.

The Hilltoppers are back in action today, taking on Illinois State at 2 p.m. at Nick Denes Field.

**Western baseball game gets postponed**

Western Kentucky University's season-opening baseball game against Illinois State that was scheduled for today at Nick Denes Field has been postponed.

The game has been rescheduled for 2 p.m. Monday at Nick Denes Field.

All weekend games will be played as scheduled with Western facing Illinois State on Saturday at noon and Sunday at 1 p.m.
WKU baseball team loses 9-6 to U of L

LOUISVILLE — Key Voshell and Kyle Rajzick each tallied three hits to lead University of Louisville's baseball team to a 9-6 win over Western Kentucky on Tuesday at Cardinal Stadium.

Trailing 2-1, Louisville (8-2) scored five runs in the bottom of the fourth inning. The Cardinals pushed their lead to 8-2 before the Hilltoppers (6-2) scored two runs in both the seventh and eighth innings.

Chris Yeo and Lorenzo Ferguson each had two hits for Western. Matt Idle scored two RBIs. Hilltopper starter Kevin Love (2-1) took the loss on the mound.

Western returns to action Friday, opening Sun Belt Conference play with a 6:30 p.m. contest at South Alabama.

Western Kentucky 666 903-209- S 10 6
Louisville 502 611 152- S 11 2

WP - Steven Hevroy (1-0) LP - Kevin Love (2-1)
Save - Tyler Karcher (2)
Hilltoppers drop two straight to Jaguars

MOBILE, Ala. — Western Kentucky University's baseball team fell 8-5 in its second straight loss to Sun Belt Conference rival South Alabama on Saturday.

Jaguars pitcher Layne Meyer struck out eight Hilltoppers over seven innings for his second win of the season.

South Alabama (8-8, 2-0) led Western (6-4, 0-2) the entire game and had 15 hits to the Hilltoppers' seven.

Lorenzo Ferguson led the Hilltoppers with two hits, one of which was a one-run homer. The home run was Ferguson's third of the season. Teammate Curtis Bliss also hit a home run, which marked his second of the season.

The Hilltoppers will try to prevent a three-game sweep today against South Alabama at 1:00 p.m.

**South Alabama 7 Western Kentucky 4**

MOBILE, Ala. — South Alabama tallied 14 of the game's 21 hits to hand the Hilltoppers their third loss of the season in this conference opener for both teams on Friday.

Trailing 4-3, the Jaguars (7-8, 1-0) scored three runs in the bottom of the sixth inning to put the game out of reach.

Matt Fox and Luis Rodriguez led Western (6-3, 0-1) with two hits each. Kevin Clutter led the Hilltoppers with two RBIs.

In the bottom of the 10th, Jeff Vance shut down the Jaguars to preserve a 5-3 Hilltopper win.

Down 3-2 in the top of the ninth, Western tied the game on catcher Bliss' solo homer. The blast was the third home run this season by Bliss, a junior.

The Hilltoppers picked up the first two runs of the game in the second inning, when a Luis Rodriguez single scored Freeman and Lorenzo Ferguson hit a sacrifice fly to score Bliss.

Bliss and Freeman each had two hits.

Western (7-4) will be back in action on Wednesday, hosting Louisville in a 2 p.m. game at Nick Denes Field.

WKU avoids sweep with win over Jags

MOBILE, Ala. — Western Kentucky University senior first baseman T.J. Freeman's 10th inning single helped his team avoid a three-game sweep to Sun Belt Conference foe South Alabama on Sunday.

With the bases loaded and two outs in the top of the 10th, Freeman stroked a single to score Matt Idlett and Chris Yee.

In the bottom of the 10th, Jeff Vance shut down the Jaguars to preserve a 5-3 Hilltopper win.

Down 3-2 in the top of the ninth,Western tied the game on catcher Bliss' solo homer. The blast was the third home run this season by Bliss, a junior.

The Hilltoppers picked up the first two runs of the game in the second inning, when a Luis Rodriguez single scored Freeman and Lorenzo Ferguson hit a sacrifice fly to score Bliss.

Bliss and Freeman each had two hits.

Western (7-4) will be back in action on Wednesday, hosting Louisville in a 2 p.m. game at Nick Denes Field.
Cards end Hilltopper rally with 9-8 victory

By the Daily News

Western Kentucky University baseball player Lorenzo Ferguson was thrown out at third base with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning as Louisville ended a Hilltopper rally to preserve a 9-8 win Wednesday at Nick Denes Field.

Western (13-1) led 3-1 after three innings, but the Cardinals (11-2) blew the game wide open with a five-run fifth inning to take an 8-6 lead.

The Hilltoppers later scored two more runs, but they weren't enough as Louisville got a ninth run in the last inning for the final margin.

Chris Yeo and T.J. Freeman led Western with three hits each. Freeman had a two-run homer and a team-high three RBIs.

The Hilltoppers travel to Louisiana on Saturday to begin a weekend series with Sun Belt Conference rival New Orleans at 1 p.m.

Louisville 12-0-0 (9)
Western Kentucky 12-4

Louisville 12-0-0 (9)
Western Kentucky 12-4

Soccer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Western Kentucky University's soccer team opened its spring exhibition season with a 1-0 win over the Nashville Metros at the MetroSoccer Complex.

Donovan Schatz's goal in the 35th minute was all the scoring the Hilltoppers would need.

Western outshot the Metros 6-3.

The Hilltoppers host Louisville on Saturday at 1 p.m. A site has yet to be announced.
Western wins two of three games at UNO

NEW ORLEANS — Western Kentucky University’s baseball team took two of three games against Sun Belt Conference foe New Orleans this weekend.

The Hilltoppers dropped a 10-5 decision to New Orleans on Sunday after sweeping Saturday’s doubleheader 11-2 and 12-3.

On Sunday, New Orleans catcher Matt Matejek hit two home runs to lead the Privateers (8-10 overall, 4-2 Sun Belt). Luisano Ferguson led Western (9-6, 3-3) with two hits.

In Saturday’s opener, Josh Novotney scattered seven hits and gave up just two runs to pace Western. Anthony Saporito and Curtis Bliss both had home runs for the Hilltoppers. Bliss had three RBIs.

In Saturday’s nightcap, Ryan Houdek (2-1) scattered eight hits and allowed no earned runs in the complete-game win. Chris Yeo scored two runs and added an RBI.

Western returns to action Tuesday with a 3 p.m. contest at Belmont.

Sunday’s games
Game one
Western 220 017 000- 5 7 2
New Orleans 200 000 000- 12 13 2
WP—Brian Justice (2-0). LP—Ryan Hunten (1-2). Base on balls (5).

Game two
Western 104 414 000- 14 14 1
New Orleans 000 100 031- 2 7 2
WP—Josh Novotney (0-1). LP—Buddy Turcotte (0-1).

Saturday’s games
Game one
Western 220 132 000- 11 14 1
New Orleans 000 100 019- 2 7 2
WP—Josh Novotney (0-1). LP—Buddy Turcotte (0-1).

Game two
Western 104 612 00- 12 13 1
New Orleans 000 100 026- 3 8 6
WP—Ryan Houdek (2-1). LP—Boyd Trancher (2-3).
Catcher's three homers propel Western to win

By the Daily News  

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Catcher Curtis Bliss hit three home runs and finished 3-for-5 with five RBIs to lead Western Kentucky University's baseball team to a 16-3 rout of Belmont on Tuesday at Greer Stadium.

The Hilltoppers (10-6) pounded 20 hits off four Belmont pitchers. Chris Yeo had three hits for Western. Six other Hilltoppers had two hits apiece, including Bowling Green High School graduate TJ. Freeman, who knocked two doubles.

Leading 6-3, Western scored eight runs in the top of the seventh to blow the game open.

Franklin-Simpson High School graduate Justin Lawrence was the benefactor of the run support, picking up the win on the mound to improve to 2-0. Lawrence allowed three runs (two earned) and six hits in six innings of work.

Belmont dropped to 12-9 with the loss.

Western returns to action Thursday, hosting Western Illinois at 2 p.m.

Western Kentucky 10 0 0 0 0 0 3 10 X
Belmont 1 0 0 X 0 0 0 0 0

WP: Justin Lawrence (2-0). LP: David Sliwa (4-3).

Women's golf

BURLINGTON, N.C. — Western's women's golf team finished 11th out of 14 teams in the Elon College Invitational held Monday and Tuesday.

Geesenwood High School graduate Ashley Smith led Western, tying for 28th place with a two-round total of 177. Other finishers for Western included Beth Blevins (43rd, 183), Jamie Hagedorn (tie 54th, 193), Jocelyn Cross (tie 54th, 193) and Jenny Rightmyer (tie 59th, 196).

Charleston Southern won the team title with a 662. Charleston Southern's Astand Oldisowski took individual honors with a 157 in the tournament.

Western returns to action at the Jacksonville State Gator Invitational scheduled for Monday and Tuesday in Jacksonville, Ala.
Tops pick up 13-6 win

By the Daily News

Western Kentucky University's baseball team broke open a close 5-4 game with a six-run fifth inning and went on to beat Western Illinois 13-6 Thursday at Nick Denet Field.

Bowling Green High School graduate T.J. Freeman capped Western's six-run inning with three RBIs on a double to center field.

Chris Yoo, Matt Idelit, Curtis Bliss and Anthony Saporito each had three hits for the Hilltoppers. Idelit also hit his first home run of the season and had three RBIs.

Jay Meyer picked up the for Western, giving up two hits while striking out one in two innings.

Western hosts Arkansas State on Saturday in a doubleheader at 2 p.m.

Western 13 0 0 0 0 6 10 3
Arkansas State 2 2 0 0 0 4 13 2

W--Meyer (1-0); L--Montgomery.
Daily News
3/21/99
3B

Tops split two with SBC foe

By the Daily News

Western Kentucky University's baseball team split a doubleheader with Sun Belt Conference foe Arkansas State on Saturday at Nick Denes Field.

Junior Josh Novotney pitched a complete-game shutout to provide Western with a 5-0 win in the first contest. Novotney scattered six hits over nine innings while collecting eight strikeouts and allowing just one walk to push his pitching record to 3-1 on the season.

Offensively, Bowling Green High School graduate T.J. Freeman and Anthony Saporito led the Hilltoppers with two hits each. Freeman also had two RBIs and hit his second home run of the season.

In the second game, the Indians (19-11 overall, 2-5 Sun Belt Conference) scored four runs in the first two innings and then held off Western for a 4-3 win.

Matt Idlett, Matt Fox, Aaron Faulkerson, Lorenzo Ferguson, Freeman and Saporito each had one hit for the Hilltoppers (12-7, 4-4).

Western and Arkansas State will conclude their series today at 1 p.m.

Game 1
Arkansas State 990 090 0
Western Kentucky 001 021 000 0 6 0
WP - Western's Jol;... 12-
LHP - Arkansas' J.;... 12-

Game 2
Arkansas State 990 090 0
Western Kentucky 000 000 0 0 0
WP - Arkansas' J.;... 12-
LHP - Western's Jol;... 12-
Western Kentucky University senior third baseman Tony Saporito dives back to first base to avoid being tagged out by Vanderbilt first baseman Mark Prior on Wednesday at Nick Denes Field. The Hilltoppers lost 7-4.

**Mental mistakes cost Western in 7-4 defeat**

By JEFF NATIONS

Western Kentucky University baseball coach Joel Murrie has been around long enough to realize how long a season lasts.

Murrie knows he has to maintain an even keel throughout the long baseball months, never getting too high with victories or too low after losses.

So after losing 7-4 to visiting Vanderbilt on Wednesday night at Nick Denes Field, Murrie was doing his best to hold his temper.

"As a team this was not a good performance," Murrie said. "Our offense suffered through some really poor at-bats, as well as mental mistakes on the bases. The worst part, and this is what I told my players, is that we've a much better team than what we showed tonight."

Western (13-8) fell behind early, rallied back to tie the game in the seventh inning and promptly gave up three more runs in the last two innings to lose it.

"We should have won this one," Hilltopper sophomore reliever Brian Houdek said. "We came out not mentally prepared."

More than the seven earned runs that Western's pitching staff surrendered or the Hilltoppers' relatively quiet bats, Murrie was unhappy with the mental mistakes that don't show up so easily in the final boxscore. Mistakes like getting caught in an unassisted double play at second base, which killed a potential rally in the sixth inning. Or blunders at the plate, where Hilltopper batters twice missed hit-and-run signs. Even the pitchers weren't immune, several times throwing fat pitches over the plate on two-strike counts.

"Those are areas that don't go in the boxscore, but as coaches we realize how important they are," Murrie said. "That's the game within the game."

Early on, it looked as though the game belonged to Vanderbilt (13-11). Hilltopper sophomore righthander Justin Lawrence, making just his second career start, didn't have his best stuff against the Commodores. Vanderbilt chased Lawrence after just 2 1/3 innings after scoring four runs on seven hits off him to take the early lead.

Houdek and fellow reliever junior Justin Idlett drove him in with a looping liner down the first-base line. One out later, senior third baseman Tony Saporito drove Idlett in with a single to center field.

Western gained back the other two runs in the bottom of the seventh inning with a two-out rally. Yeo got on base with a single, stole second base and advanced to third on a wild pitch. Idlett walked, then stole second. Vanderbilt catcher Andy Kropf's throw to second was wild, allowing Yeo to score. Western senior first baseman T.J. Freeman followed with a single to drive in Idlett.

But the Hilltoppers didn't hold the lead for long. Vanderbilt freshman rightfielder Aaron Fausett slugged a 2-run home run. The Commodores tacked on two more runs in the top of the ninth.

"We just need to forget about it," Idlett said. "We played so bad it's hard to gain any positives."

Western will be back in action Friday at Sun Belt Conference rival Southwestern Louisiana for a 7 p.m. game in Lafayette, La.
Western tennis ties school record

By the Daily News

Western Kentucky University’s men’s tennis team tied a school record Tuesday with its 20th win of the season.

The Hilltoppers’ 7-0 victory over visiting David Lipscomb improved their record to 20-1, tying the school mark for wins set in 1974. Western, which has won 17 straight matches, can set a new school record when it returns to action Saturday at Tennessee State.

No. 2 singles player Michael Lindskog improved to 21-0 on the season with his 6-0, 6-1 win over Zack London.

Baseball

Western’s baseball team snapped a four-game losing streak with a 10-2 win over visiting Murray State on Tuesday.

Tony Saporito led the Hilltoppers at the plate, going 3-for-4 with a home run and five RBIs. Matt Idlett hit a home run and scored three runs for Western (14-11). Kevin Clutter added two RBIs.

T.J. Johnson improved to 2-0 with the victory, allowing no runs and three hits in five innings of work.

Western returns to action today with a 5 p.m. game at Vanderbilt.

Murray State 000 000 200- 2 9 1
Western Kentucky 204 000 11x- 19 6 0
WP - T.J. Johnson (2-0); LP - Aaron Russelburg (2-8).

Women’s basketball

Western’s women’s basketball team handed out its postseason awards at its annual banquet Tuesday at the WKU Institute for Economic Development.

Seniors Shea Lunsford, Kristi Hartley, Katashia Witcher and Wendi Kitsteiner received co-most valuable player honors.

Other winners included:

• Rachel Byars – most improved
• academic achievement.
• Kitsteiner – academic achievement.
• Witcher – Harry Burns courage award.
• Jamie Britt – sixth woman.
• Kristina Covington – rookie of the year.
• ShaRae Mansfield – coaches award.

The Lady Toppers finished the season 21-7.
WKU loses 5-4 at USL

By the Daily News

LAFAYETTE, La. - Western Kentucky University's baseball team rallied for four runs in the top of the ninth inning only to surrender a run in the bottom of the ninth in a 5-4 loss at Southwestern Louisiana on Friday.

The Ragin' Cajuns (18-10 overall, 7-3 Sun Belt Conference) scored two runs in both the first and fourth innings to take a 4-0 lead.

But Hilltopper center fielder Matt Fox knocked in three runs in the top of the ninth and later scored to tie the game at 4-all.

Western's Josh Novotney (3-2), who struck out nine in a complete-game effort, allowed the winning run in the bottom of the ninth.

Southwestern Louisiana's Phil Devey tallied a career-high 16 strikeouts and allowed Western just three hits in 8 1/3 innings of work but did not pick up the win. Brannon Baranowski (4-3) got the victory in relief.

Western (13-9, 5-5) and Southwestern Louisiana will meet again today at 1 p.m. The two teams will close their three-game series Sunday at 1 p.m.

Western Kentucky 000 000 004- 4-3
Southwestern Louisiana 200 200 001- 5-3
WP - Brannon Baranowski (4-3). LP - Josh Novotney (3-2).

March 27, 1999
Hilltoppers fall 9-7 to Middle Tennessee

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. — A five-run eighth inning propelled homestanding Middle Tennessee State to a 9-7 win over Western Kentucky on Tuesday in college baseball.

The loss spoiled a strong outing by Hilltopper junior starting pitcher Josh Novotney, who hurled five innings and allowed two runs on seven hits.

Offensively for Western (15-14), first baseman T.J. Freeman was 3-for-3 and hit his fifth home run of the season. Junior catcher Curtis Bliss was 2-for-4 with three RBIs. Bliss connected for his ninth home run of the season.

Western hosts Austin Peay at 6 p.m. today at Nick Denes Field.

Western Kentucky 101 300 3 9 7
Middle Tennessee 010 101 15x- 8 9 2
WP - Jeff Parsons (3-2), LP - Nathan Isenberg (0-1), SV - Kyle Sparkman (3).
Hilltoppers get solid pitching in victory

Western Kentucky's string of strong pitching performances continued in Tuesday's 6-3 college baseball win over visiting Middle Tennessee.

Junior right-hander Jay Meyer started and got the win, allowing one earned run while striking out nine. Senior Nathan Isenberg earned his second save of the season.

Senior first baseman T.J. Freeman led the Hilltopper offense with a 2-for-4 performance, including his ninth home run. Freeman had two RBIs. Sophomore outfielder Matt Fox added a 3-for-5 day with two RBIs.

Western will play at 5 p.m. today at Tennessee Tech in Cookeville, Tenn.

Middle Tennessee

Western Kentucky

WP - Jay Meyer (2-1), LP - Kyle Sparkman (1-3). Save - Nathan Isenberg (2).
WKU splits doubleheader

By the Daily News

JONESBORO, Ark. - Western Kentucky University’s baseball team split a doubleheader with Sun Belt Conference foe Arkansas State at Tomlinson Stadium on Saturday.

The Hilltoppers crushed the Indians 13-4 in the first game, but fell 1-0 in the nightcap.

Arkansas State’s run in the bottom of the fourth inning was all the Indians (14-23, 4-15 in Sun Belt Conference) needed to down Western (20-17, 10-10 in SBC) in the second game.

Five players had one hit apiece for the Hilltoppers.

In the first game, Western pitcher Josh Novotney scattered seven hits and collected nine strikeouts in eight innings of work.

Novotney was backed offensively by 11 hits. Chris Yeo and Anthony Saporito led the Hilltoppers with three hits each.

The Hilltoppers finish their weekend series with Arkansas State today at 1 p.m.

Game two

Western Kentucky 000 000 0 5 0
Arkansas State 000 100 0 1 6 2
WP - Matt Hale (6-2). LP - Brian Houdek (3-4).

Game one

Western Kentucky 200 221 033 13 11 1
Arkansas State 004 000 000 4 7 3
WP - Josh Novotney (6-2). LP - Gary Wilson (3-5).
Hilltoppers stay hot against Sun Belt foe

JONESBORO, Ark. — Western Kentucky University senior third baseman Anthony Saporito drove in three runs to lead the Hilltoppers to a 9-3 victory Sunday at Sun Belt Conference rival Arkansas State.

Senior right fielder Kevin Clutter added his second home run of the season for Western (21-17, 11-10 in Sun Belt), which took two of three games from the Indians.

Clutter finished with two RBIs. Sophomore left fielder Matt Fox added two RBIs for the Hilltoppers, while senior first baseman T.J. Freeman was 2-for-3.

Ryan Hutchinson and Jeff Vance combined to surrender just eight hits to Arkansas State (14-24, 4-16).

Western will host Evansville at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Nick Denes Field.

Western Kentucky 204 200 001 - 9 8 0
Arkansas State 000 000 001 - 3 8 3
WP - Ryan Hutchinson (4-4). LP - John Hayduk (2-8).
Hilltoppers fall late to visiting Evansville

Western Kentucky University's baseball team gave up two unearned runs in the ninth inning Tuesday to drop a 5-3 decision to visiting Evansville.

Senior right fielder Chris Yeo led the Hilltoppers at the plate with a 2-for-4 day and two RBIs. Center fielder Lorenzo Ferguson added an RBI and designated hitter Aaron Begleosen had two hits for Western (21-18).

Vince Serafini pitched four innings of scoreless relief to earn the win for Evansville (24-14-1).

Western returns to action today hosting Eastern Kentucky in a 6 p.m. game at Nick Denes Field.
Colonels smash 18 hits to beat Western

By JEFF NATIONS (AP) 4/24
The Daily News

When Western Kentucky University senior third baseman Tony Saporito says he can't wait for the weekends to arrive, he speaks for the whole baseball team.

While the Hilltoppers have spotted recently during the weekday games (including an 0-2 mark this week), Western has been strong on the weekends.

"We've had better pitching performances during the weekends," Saporito said. "That makes our whole team better. When you've got good pitching, it keeps you more focused on what you're doing in the game."

Part of that strong weekend pitching is planned—like all teams in the Sun Belt Conference, the Hilltoppers play conference rivals on the weekends. With seeding for this year's conference tournament on the line, Hilltopper coach Joel Morris rotates his top three starters for the end of the week series.

Today, Hilltopper No. 1 starter Josh Novotney takes on Southwest- ern Louisiana No. 1 starter Phil Devey in the opening of a three-game series. That game is set to begin at 5 p.m. at Nick Denes Field.

Novotney and Devey duelled in earlier in the season in Lafayette. La. Devey got the better of that matchup, going eight innings and striking out 16 Hilltoppers to earn a 5-1 win.

The Ragin' Cajuns, currently a half-game atop the Sun Belt stand- ings, swept that series with Western by scores of 12-8 and 1-0, Western is tied with New Orleans for third place in the Sun Belt.

"I think if anything, the fact that we get swept in our minds," Hilltopper senior right fielder Chris You said. "We know we can play at their level. At the same time, we never did what it took to win those games."

Devey (6-0, 2.65 ERA) and Novotney (6-2, 3.82 ERA) are both among the top starters in the conference, You said.

Western waiting for the weekend

"Don't be expecting a lot of runs in that game," You said.

Southwestern Louisiana coach Tony Robichaux knows how fragile his team's Sun Belt lead is and expects another tight series with the Hilltoppers.

"They're a good ball club," Robichaux said. "We were fortunate to be at home. Our starters pitched real well and we got some timely hitting. To us, every weekend is important no matter who we play."

"It's a conference, so you want to play your best." Western assistant coach Dan Mosier thinks his Hilltoppers have played their best on the weekends—without the Hilltoppers' 11-10 mark in the conference currently ranked No. 6. in the KPI ratings. Mosier just wishes his team would spend a little more of the solid play to the week-day games.

"This team is hard to read," Mosier said. "We've played well on weekends. I don't know if we don't, if mentally we don't focus as hard as we should, but we've found ways to lose during the week."

While pitching, both starting and relief, was a culprit for the latest two-game slide, Mosier said other factors have contributed the the Hilltoppers' tough times.

"It's been, tough," Saporito said. "Our bats are no home for it, too. We've been up and down. We don't have that consistent level of play—we're either too high or too low."

Offensively, You is currently fourth in the Sun Belt with a .364 batting average and also ranks fourth on the league in hits.

The Hilltoppers are batting a combined .292 this season, good for third place in the Sun Belt.

Ragin' Cajuns down Hilltoppers at home

Western Kentucky University's baseball team dropped the opening game of a three-game series Friday 8-4 to Sun Belt Conference rival Southwestern Louisiana.

The Hilltoppers lost the Tuesday home part of the season for the Hilltoppers (23-29, 1-11-1) vs. Sun Belt.

Southwestern Louisiana starting pitcher Phil Devey outdistorted Western's Josh Novotney to earn the win. Brannon Ragasowz scored the save for the Ragin' Cajuns (30-14, 16-4).

Western meets Southwestern Louisiana again today in a 2 p.m. doubleheader at Nick Denes Field.

Lineup was unavailable.

Hilltoppers rally for 9-8 win over Cajuns

After falling behind 9-5 to Southwestern Louisiana in the top of the 12th inning, Western Kentucky's baseball team rallied on Saturday to win the series.

Down 9-5, the Hilltoppers rallied in the bottom of the 12th inning, scoring four runs to win the game 14-9.

Roughly 12 hours after they last took the field, the Hilltoppers met the Ragin' Cajuns again on Saturday.

Two runs were scored by Cajuns (30-15, 10-9) overall, 18-5 Sun Belt at 9-5 lead in the top of the 12th inning, before the Hilltoppers (22-29, 12-11-1) rallied.

Tony You led off the bottom of the 12th with a double and Matt Idict followed with a walk. Bowling Green High School graduate, TJ. Freeman then slapped a three-run home run to tie the game at 9-6.

Weters went on to load the bases, and Tanner Watson smacked home Matt Fox for the victory.

T. Freeman finished the game 4-for-6 with five RBIs. His hit total was his 11th of the season. Idict finished with three hits while You and Tony Saporito both tallied two.

Western's victory snapped an 11-game losing streak to the Ragin' Cajuns. The two teams close their series today at 1 p.m. at Nick Denes Field.

The Louisianas split the series on Friday 8-4 and Saturday 14-9.
Toppers shed Cajuns' hex, take series 2-1

With 8-5 victory Sunday, Western third in SBC race

By JASON FRAKES
The Daily News

The Ragin' Cajuns' hex has been shed.

Losers of 10 straight games to the University of Southwestern Louisiana entering this weekend's series at Nick Denes Field, Western Kentucky's baseball team had developed a bit of a complex when it came to playing the Ragin' Cajuns.

"It gets to be a mental thing," Hilltopper right fielder Chris Yeo said. "You start thinking. These guys are pretty good, and we just can't seem to beat them."

The streak ran to 11 Friday in Western's 8-4 loss, but a four-run, 12th-inning rally Saturday gave the Hilltoppers a 9-8 victory over Southwestern Louisiana. That momentum carried over Sunday as Western beat the Ragin' Cajuns 8-5 to win the weekend series 2-1.

After entering the weekend atop the Sun Belt Conference standings, Southwestern Louisiana (30-16 overall, 18-6 Sun Belt) fell into second place, one-half game behind South Alabama (27-16, 18-5).

Western sits alone in third place at 23-20 overall and 13-10 in the league, but perhaps none of the league's teams displayed more happiness Sunday.

"One, we've proven we can beat them," Hilltopper coach Joel Murinc said. "And two, they know that we can beat them. In terms of confi-
WKU right fielder SBC’s Player of Week

By the Daily News  
April 27, 1997

Western Kentucky University senior right fielder Chris Yeo was named the Sun Belt Conference Player of the Week after a 12-for-21 (.521) performance in five games. He also scored eight runs for the Hilltoppers.

Yeo had two doubles and two triples and drove in seven RBIs in each day. After finishing the season as Western’s third baseman, the returning rehabilitation of the Western baseball team has been crucial.

Chris Yeo was named the Sun Belt Conference Player of the Week for his contributions to the Western team. He had two doubles and two triples, driving in seven RBIs in each day. The Western baseball team has been crucial, with Yeo contributing significantly to their success.

Swimming

Western’s swimming and diving teams headed out to its annual awards on Saturday.

Kicker Vencill received both the Most Valuable and Most Improved Swimmer Awards for the men’s team after finishing the season as Western’s leading point-scorer at the National Independent Championships.

Brandi Beckwith, in her final two rounds of the Belt Conference Championships, tied for 21st with an 89 and won the Cal Ripken Jr. Award. Amanda Shafer also won the Scholar Athlete Award and was named the Most Improved. Brent Brown took second in the men’s 1,500 with a time of 4:08.29.

In the field events, Western’s Kellie Brown is tied for eighth with a season-best throw of 52'01/2". She also won the Scholastic Athlete Award, Amanda Shafer and Michelle Lynch were picked as co-Most Improved.

Jack Bass took the Most Dedicated Swimmer honors and Jennifer Johnson won the Cal Ripken Jr. Ironman Award. Richard Roy and Jennifer Pimentel won the team’s annual “Oval Can” award.

Soccer

Western’s soccer team got three no-decisions in Saturday’s Vanderbilt Tournament.

All four teams in the tournament played three, 50-minute matches Saturday.

Against Alabama-Birmingham, Brandon Thompson got the Hilltoppers on the scoreboard with an assist and a goal to end the scoring. It was 1-0.

Against the Blazers’ team, Western returned to action Saturday at the National Invitational in Bloomington, Ind.

Raine Larsen was second in the second in the 800-meter run with a time of 2:03.73, while the Lady Topper’s Tanyita Watkins took second in the 400-meter hurdles (1:08.22). Rorette Redford was third in the 100-meter hurdles with a season-best 14.94.

Bad Smart and Bryan Daniel were 1-2 in the 100-meter dash. Smart ran it in 10.76 to beat Daniel by 0.13. Brent Brown took second in the men’s 1,500 with a time of 4:05.71 and Hilltopper teammate Brandon McKinney won third at 4:08.29.

In the field events, Western’s Shawn Evans (52'01/2") and Parvin Greene (19'11/4") finished in second and third respectively in the shot put. Evans also took second in the discus with a season-best throw of 138’0”.

Western returns to action Saturday at the National Invitational in Bloomington, Ind.
Younger signs with Brescia

Hilltoppers win at UK

Sam Younger, a goalkeeper at Owensboro Catholic High, signed a scholarship with Brescia University on Tuesday.

Younger was a full-time starter as a senior, while seeing action as a part-time starter as a junior.

"Sam’s strengths are his desire to get to the ball and his quickness in the goal mouth,” said his high school coach, David Ralph. "He’s one of the best one-on-one keepers in the area. He’s very tough on point-blank shots."

A 6-foot-2, 180-pounder, Younger follows a long line of Aces goalkeepers who have gone on to play at the collegiate level: Ryan Lossie (Western Kentucky), Kevin Muncey (Murray State) and Brian Ebelhar (Lindsey Wilson). Younger becomes the second Catholic High player to sign with the Bearcats. Earlier in the month, Brescia signed Jonathan Velotta.

Freeman had three hits and Kevin Clutter added two for the Hilltoppers (24-20).

Western Kentucky broke a 5-5 tie with two runs in the top of the ninth. Beau Moore and Aaron McGlone each homered and drove in two for Kentucky (18-25).

Nathan Isenberg (H) pitched 1% innings to get the victory. Austin Madison (0-1) took the loss.
**A Top player**

Western Kentucky University senior right fielder Chris Yeo hit .321 in the past week with seven RBIs. Yeo capped off his week with a 4-for-4 performance in the Hilltoppers' 8-5 win over Southwestern Louisiana on Sunday. Yeo, who leads Western with a .381 batting average, was also named the Sun Belt Conference's Player of the Week.

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**BG grad leads Tops to win**

By the Daily News

LEXINGTON — Bowling Green High School graduate T.J. Freeman homered and drove in four runs to lead Western Kentucky University's baseball team to a 7-5 win at Kentucky on Tuesday. Aaron McGlone hit his 13th home run of the season to lead Kentucky (18-25). Freeman's home run increased his home run of the season to lead Western's team-high total to 12 on the season. His 3-for-5 performance also included a double and two runs scored. Kevin Clutter added two hits for Western (24-20), which broke a 5-all tie with two runs in the top of the ninth inning. The win was the third in a row for the Hilltoppers.

Warren East graduate Nathan Isenberg (1-1) got his first win of the season, pitching 1 1/3 innings of scoreless relief. Aaron McGlone hit his 13th home run of the season to lead Kentucky (18-25).

Western will host Tennessee Tech at 6 p.m. today at Nick Denes Field. Western Kentucky Kentucky 300 300 000- 7 4 2 WP - Nathan Isenberg (1-1). LP - Austin Madison 135 016 014- 11 4

Arkansas-Little Rock 010 000 000- 5 4 1 WP - Nathan Isenberg (1-1). LP - Jacob Anderson (6-6).

**WKU beats UALR in baseball twinbill**

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Western Kentucky University's baseball team swept a doubleheader against Sun Belt Conference foe Arkansas-Little Rock on Saturday.

In the first game, the Hilltoppers pounded the Trojans (19-28) for 14 hits en route to a commanding 13-1 win.

Western (26-21) got three hits apiece from Bowling Green High School graduate T.J. Freeman, Chris Yeo, and Anthony Saporito.

Freeman led the Hilltoppers with 4 RBIs, followed by Chris Yeo with three and Saporito with two each, Ferguson, who had two hits, Freeman and Yeo also hit one home run each.

Ryan Hutchison picked up the win on the mound for Western, scattering five hits and allowing one run in seven innings of work. Hutchison pitched six straight shutdown innings.

Reliever T.J. Johnson then finished off Arkansas-Little Rock with two shutdown innings of his own.

The second game was much closer, but the Hilltoppers came out on top with a crucial run at the top of the eighth inning.

With one out, Aaron Fogleseong, who came in to pinch hit for Curtis Bliss, was walked. Jerry Coell, who was brought in to pinch for Fogleseong, then stole second and scored the winning run on a double by Kevin Clutter.

Matt Idlett, Freeman and Clutter led the Hilltoppers with two hits each.

Warren East High School graduate Nathan Isenberg got the win on the mound, allowing just four hits in four innings.

The Hilltoppers will try for a weekend sweep against the Trojans today at 1 p.m.

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**staff and wire reports**
Tech outhits WKU

By JEFF NATIONS
The Daily News

Western Kentucky University baseball player Luis Rodriguez (left) avoids the tag of Tennessee Tech's Wesley Dunn at second base Wednesday at Nick Denes Field. Tennessee Tech defeated the Hilltoppers 8-4.

One pitch.
Just one throw from Western Kentucky University starting pitcher Kevin Love was all Tennessee Tech’s Chad Rogers needed to set the tone of Wednesday’s game at Nick Denes Field.

Love served up a fastball for the game’s first pitch, and Rogers rapped a solid single into left field. The Golden Eagles followed up that hit with 13 more in the game to post an 8-4 victory over the Hilltoppers.

“Two things happened in this game,” Western coach Joel Murrie said. “When we made poor pitches, they hit the ball hard. When we had the opportunity to swing at pitches with men on base, we didn’t do it. This was a team effort.”

Tennessee Tech (16-26) outhit Western 14-6 in the game, which came just a day after the Hilltoppers picked up a big 7-5 victory against state rival Kentucky in Lexington. The loss also snapped a Western three-game winning streak.

Murrie didn’t think the loss will break his team’s momentum. If the Hilltoppers had any to begin with.

“I don’t think so,” Murrie said. “You would never know by the way we played today that we were balling against two tough teams.

Momentum – that’s a word we use to flatter ourselves after a big win.”

The Golden Eagles took the momentum Wednesday and wouldn’t give it up. After loading the bases in the top of the first, Tennessee Tech took the lead for good on a base-clearing triple down the right-field line by Michael Miehls.

Tennessee Tech tacked on another run in the third inning after Western center fielder Lorenzo Ferguson misplayed Jesse Johnson’s liner, which bounced over Ferguson’s head for a triple.

Gabe Zook singled to bring Johnson home and give the Golden Eagles a 4-0 lead.

“Our record is not indicative of the type of team we are,” Tennessee Tech coach Mike Maack said. “We’ve lost a lot of one-run games this year, but we play hard.”

Western (24-21) finally got to Tech starter Aaron Olita in the third inning.

After loading the bases, Olita allowed back-to-back runs by walking Tanner Townsend and Ferguson.

By the fourth inning, both teams were ready to bring in relief. But while the Golden Eagles got a solid performance from a trio of freshman hurlers, the Hilltoppers’ relief was anything but that against Tech.

Western sophomore Justin Lawrence came on to start the fourth inning, promptly gave up two straight singles and committed a throwing error to help Tennessee Tech score the first of three runs in the inning. Lawrence gave up another run in the top of the fifth inning after three more singles, with Johnson driving in his team’s eighth run of the game.

Tennessee Tech’s relief from David Jackson, Jim Ed Wardens and Jason Kuhn largely kept Western’s bats silent.

The Hilltoppers managed just three hits and two runs over the final six innings.

“You’ve got to tip your hat to them – they threw strikes, quality strikes,” said Hilltopper sophomore reliever T.J. Johnson, who shut down Tech over the final four innings.

“They held our sticks to six hits all day.”

Western picked up a run in the fifth inning when Curtis Bliss slapped a leadoff double and Townsend drove him in with a single.

The Hilltoppers scored their final run in the seventh inning when Jackson walked Ferguson with the bases loaded to force in a run.

“We didn’t come out prepared to play baseball,” Western senior first baseman T.J. Freeman said. “Nobody comes out and tries to lose. We came out flat and got beat in the game of baseball.”

Western returns to action Saturday at Sun Belt Conference foe Arkansas-Little Rock for a double-header. Saturday’s first game is set for 1 p.m. in Little Rock, Ark.

Tennessee Tech 0 0 0-0 4 6 2
Western Kentucky 0 0 2 0 1 0 0

1B – Murrie (2) for 1 p.m. in Little Rock, Ark.
Western Tech 301 303 0 0 2 3 6 3

WP – Aaron Olita (5-4). LP – Kevin Love (2-4).

DAILY NEWS, BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY
Tops sweep series, remain third in SBC

By the Daily News

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Chris Yeo and T.J. Freeman each homered to lead Western Kentucky University's baseball team to a 7-5 win at Arkansas-Little Rock on Sunday, giving the Hilltoppers a sweep of the three-game series.

Western improved to 27-21 overall and stayed in third place in the Sun Belt Conference standings with a 16-11 mark. The Hilltoppers have won 10 of their past 12 Sun Belt games.

Matt Idlett was 3-for-4 for Western with three doubles, two runs scored and an RBI. Jeff Vance added two hits and two RBIs. Freeman, a Bowling Green High School graduate, tallied two RBIs and two runs scored.

Western pitcher Josh Novotney improved to 7-3 on the mound, allowing two runs and six hits over five innings. Novotney struck out four and walked just one.

Warren East High School graduate Nathan Isenberg got his third save of the season, allowing two runs and five hits in 2 1/3 innings of relief.

Jabbar West led Arkansas-Little Rock (19-20, 10-16) at the plate with four hits. Michael Thompson tallied three RBIs.

Western returns to action Thursday with a 6:30 p.m. game at Austin Peay State.

Western Kentucky 310-000-300—7 9 0
Arkansas-Little Rock 020-000-000—3 6 0

WP — Josh Novotney (1-3), LP — Alan Campbell
H HR — Isenberg (10)
Western 1B gets Player of Week

T.J. Freeman wins conference award for hitting

By the Daily News

Western Kentucky University senior first baseman T.J. Freeman was named Sun Belt Conference Player of the Week on Monday after hitting .434 during that span.

Freeman's selection gives Western two straight Player of the Week awards after Hilltopper senior right fielder Chris Yeo took the honor last week. Before that, the Hilltoppers had no players selected for the conference award.

Freeman, a Bowling Green High School graduate, went 10-for-23 during the week with four home runs, a triple, two doubles and 10 RBIs.

On Sunday, Freeman hit his 15th home run of the season to lead Western to a conference sweep at Arkansas-Little Rock. He hit three home runs in the series against the Trojans, the third time Freeman has hit at least two homers in a conference series.

"I think what's been impressive about T.J. is that he just continues to play better every week," Western coach Joel Murtrie said. "After getting off to a relatively slow start by his standards, he's been impressive offensively by hitting the ball to all fields, working the count to his advantage and being more selective at the plate."

Western (27-21, 16-11 in Sun Belt play) returns to action at 6 p.m. Thursday at Austin Peay.
Hilltoppers get look at tourney foe

Louisiana Tech will be opponent in tourney opener

By DEBRA JOHNSON
Western Kentucky University baseball coach Joel Morrie got a good, big look at his team's Sun Belt Conference Tournament opponent Saturday.

Facing Louisiana Tech in the first game of a doubleheader, the Hilltoppers lost a 5-1 sixth-inning lead and fell 10-9 in 16 innings.

Things improved for the Hilltoppers in the second game, as Brian Hendley struck out 10 Bulldogs to get Western to a 4-3 victory. The Hilltoppers took two-of-three in the series.

Judging by the outcome of Saturday's first contest, Morrie was none too thrilled by what he saw.

"It was a ballgame that we failed to close out in regulation," Morrie said. "I just felt like we gave them the chance to stay in it. Even in Friday's game (a 5-3 Hilltopper win), we just let them hang around and hang around.

"The Bulldogs hung around long enough to pick up a big win Saturday, when Tech's T.J. Vance hit an one-out triple and Aaron Lowe followed with an RBI double to put his team up 10-9.

Western (24-22, 21-12 in Sun Belt) went quickly in the bottom of the 16th inning as Louisiana Tech reliever Chad Dressel retired the Hilltoppers' Matt McDuff, T.J. Pressman and Chad Ellis in order to end the game.

Dressel combined with fellow Bulldogs' reliever Ben Hickman to shut down Western's offense for the final eight innings.

Hickman, a hard-throwing, 6-foot-3 right-hander, worked six scoreless frames before giving way to Darnell in the bottom of the 15th inning. With a fastball clocked at up to 93 mph, Hickman struck out eight Hilltoppers.

"Hickman just dominated the game," Morrie said. "He gave that type of effort, it was a situation where we needed to match up against it offensively."

The win was big for the Bulldogs, which had struggled to a 3-21 record before the victory. Louisiana Tech coach Jeff Richardson thinks Hickman might be the best pitcher in the Sun Belt this season.

"Hickman has been outstanding all year," Richardson said. "He's a good right-hander as there is in this league. Darnell struggled early in

Weber'

The Bulldogs struggled early in the game, but have been throwing a lot better lately."

The Hilltoppers seemed to have Louisiana Tech's number in the early going. After spotting the Bulldogs a 2-0 lead in the top of the second inning, Western rallied for four runs in the bottom of the frame. Jeff Vance, who would later save as one of five Hilltopper hurlers in the game, hit his first home run of the season for Western's first run.

Chris Yoos' three-run triple drove in Vance's run, then Junior followed with an RBI single and Freeman capped the rally with an RBI double.

Eastern squeezed for three more runs in the fourth as Freeman and Tony Saporito picked up RBIs. Superb access Western's third run of the inning by swiping home on a delayed steal.

"Jeff Vance did a fantastic job as did T.J. Johnson in the ninth," Morrie said. "We got ourselves in a position where we should have scored some more runs."

Sixth attempt again in the seventh. When he knocked a three-run home run past Western reliever Jay Meyer.

The Hilltoppers got two of those runs back in the seventh inning.
Tops' bags packed full

By JEFF NATIONS / The Daily News

No one can accuse Western Kentucky University third baseman Tony Saporito of being a pessimist. For this week's Sun Belt Conference Baseball Tournament, Saporito had a pair of duffel bags stuffed with clothes Sunday. He was packed for the long haul.

"I'm packing for at least the (NCAA Tournament) Regionals," Saporito said.

In his office, Western baseball coach Joel Murrie was having more trouble with his preparations for the upcoming trip.

The phone just wouldn't stop ringing, as well-wishers called to chat about strategy and the Hilltoppers' recent success. After taking two of three games from Sun Belt foe Louisiana Tech during the weekend, the Hilltoppers finished third in the final regular-season standings.

Western will meet Louisiana Tech in its tournament opener at 10 a.m. Tuesday in New Orleans. All Hilltopper games from the tournament will be broadcast live on WBGN-AM (1340).

"Do you ever feel like you're forgetting something important?" Murrie said between rings. "I always feel that way before trips.

That's what I believe, but we still have to go out and execute. We have to control the game on the mound, take advantage of offensive opportunities and play good defense."

Louisiana Tech coach Jeff Richardson got to see first-hand what his Bulldogs will be facing in the tournament's opening game, and he came away impressed.

"They've got a lot of good players on them, and it seems to be just right," Richardson said. "They've got a really strong team. Western Kentucky is well-coached and they play solid, fundamental baseball."

Murrie hasn't decided who will start in Tuesday's opener, although sophomore right-hander Ryan Hutchinson had the slight edge on junior righty Josh Novotney. Both pitched in Friday's opener against the Bulldogs - Novotney started and went five innings and Hutchinson relieved for the final four innings to earn the win.

Novotney doesn't care if he starts the opener, as long as he gets to pitch in the tournament.

"We've been getting real good pitching all the way through," Novotney said. "TJ Johnson, Jeff Vance and especially Nathan Isemberg have been pitching really good for us. We're definitely as hot as we've ever been. We're hitting the ball - a lot of our hitters struggled early, but guys like Matt Idlett have really gotten hot for us."

Murrie knows his team will have to keep that hot streak alive in the Sun Belt tournament. With the tournament's double-elimination format, the Hilltoppers could be done in two days. But like Saporito, Murrie was thinking long-term in his packing.

"I think we're playing excellent baseball," Murrie said. "At one point in the season I was concerned because after a fast start we had not won two or three in a row. But in the four or five weeks since the UNO series, we've won seven or eight in a row. At least that concern is satisfied. We can come out and rise to the occasion."

"It's an overused cliché, but it's a new season for everybody. There's not one team of the eight that doesn't feel like they're going to the NCAA Tournament."

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Sun Belt Conference baseball final standings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Sun Belt</th>
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<td>South Alabama</td>
<td>27-5</td>
<td>15-4</td>
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<td>23-9</td>
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<td>Arkansas-Little Rock</td>
<td>10-22</td>
<td>10-19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>6-25</td>
<td>6-18</td>
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1999 Sun Belt Tournament

Monday

Game 1: No. 9 Western Kentucky vs. No. 6 Louisiana Tech, 10 a.m.
Game 2: No. 2 Southeastern Louisiana vs. No. 7 Arkansas-Little Rock, 30 min. after

Tuesday

Game 3: Winner Game 1 vs. Winner Game 2, 10 a.m.
Game 4: Winner Game 1 vs. Winner Game 2, 3 p.m.

Wednesday

Game 5: Winner Game 3 vs. Winner Game 4, 4 p.m.
Game 6: Winner Game 3 vs. Winner Game 4, 7 p.m.

Thursday

Game 7: Winner Game 5 vs. Winner Game 6, 11 a.m.
Game 8: Winner Game 5 vs. Winner Game 6, 3 p.m.
Game 9: Winner Game 6 vs. Winner Game 7, 7 p.m.

Friday

Game 10: Winner Game 7 vs. Winner Game 8, 11 a.m.
Game 11: Winner Game 8 vs. Winner Game 9, 1 p.m.

Saturday

Game 12: Winner Game 7 vs. Winner Game 8, 11 a.m.
Game 13: Winner Game 9 vs. Winner Game 10, 1 p.m.
Freeman named SBC's best

WKU infielder named SBC's best infielder

By the Daily News

Western Kentucky University senior first baseman T.J. Freeman was named the Sun Belt Conference Baseball Player of the Year on Monday.

The Hilltoppers are currently in New Orleans for the Sun Belt Conference Baseball Tournament. Western took on Louisiana Tech in the tournament's opening game at 10 a.m. today.

Freeman is the first Hilltopper to win the award since Bill Weyers in 1993.

This season, Freeman led Western in home runs (16), runs batted in (54), slugging percentage (.691) and total bases (134).

Ten of his 16 home runs came in conference play.

Freeman, a Bowling Green High School graduate, was joined by Hilltopper teammate Chris Yeo on the first team.

Yeo, a senior outfielder, hit .363 with 13 doubles and a .496 on base average for Western. Yeo also scored 60 runs during the regular season and led the Hilltoppers in hits (77), triples (5) and walks (55). He started all 56 regular season games for Western.

Two Hilltoppers also were named to the second-team All-Sun Belt squad. Junior righthander Josh Novotney made the team after going 8-3 with a 3.36 ERA for Western during the regular season. Novotney worked 109.2 innings and had seven complete games for the Hilltoppers this season.

Also making the second team was Jeff Vorce, a junior utility player. As a left-handed pitcher, Vance was 2.3 with a 2.64 ERA in 44 1 innings. On offense, Vance hit .274 in 32 games for Western.

Western finished in third place in the Sun Belt regular season.

Western's All-Sun Belt Conference Baseball Team

First Team

Jeff Vorce, WKU

Second Team

Troy Reiman, Arkansas Little Rock

Player of the Year - T.J. Freeman, WKU

Newcomer of the Year - John Balton, New Orleans

Freshman of the Year - Tim Flaherty, South Alabama

Coach of the Year - Steve Kirtz, South Alabama
Ex-Raider spells relief for Toppers

Nathan Isenberg picks up sixth save in Western’s victory

By the Daily News and
The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Western Kentucky University’s baseball team got all the relief it needed in a 4-3 win over Louisiana Tech in Tuesday’s Sun Belt Conference Tournament first-round game.

Senior Nathan Isenberg, a Warren East High School graduate, took over a one-run lead for starting pitcher Ryan Hutchison in the top of the eighth inning and closed out the Bulldogs to record his sixth save of the season.

Murrie said his appearance was the majority of the bullpen it needed in the tournament since 1988.

"It’s been successful all season," Murrie said junior righty Josh Novomey (8-3, 3.28 ERA) will get the start on the mound for the Hilltoppers this season.

Third-seeded Western (35-22) advances to meet Southwestern Louisiana in a 1 p.m. game today.

The No. 2-seeded Ragin’ Cajuns. a 15-3 seed out of Sun Belt Conference, won the last two meetings at home.

That’s because Western won 4 of 6 matchups with the Ragin’ Cajuns.

That’s a 14-game streak since 1997.

Ex-Raider spells relief for Toppers

Western Kentucky University’s baseball team got all the relief it needed in a 4-3 win over Louisiana Tech in Tuesday’s Sun Belt Conference Tournament first-round game.

Senior Nathan Isenberg, a Warren East High School graduate, took over a one-run lead for starting pitcher Ryan Hutchison in the top of the eighth inning and closed out the Bulldogs to record his sixth save of the season.

Murtrie said his appearance was the majority of the bullpen it needed in the tournament since 1988.

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Third-seeded Western (35-22) advances to meet Southwestern Louisiana in a 1 p.m. game today.

The No. 2-seeded Ragin’ Cajuns. a 15-3 seed out of Sun Belt Conference, won the last two meetings at home.

That’s because Western won 4 of 6 matchups with the Ragin’ Cajuns.

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Western wins Sun Belt tourney opener 4-3

From Special and AP Dispatches

Chris Yeo singled home Tanner Townsend with one out in the seventh inning and third-seeded Western Kentucky University's baseball team beat Louisiana Tech 4-3 yesterday in the first round of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament at Metairie, La.

It was the first opening-round victory since 1988 for the Hilltoppers (36-22), who have won 11 of their past 12 games.

Yeo, an all-Sun Belt outfielder, hit the game-winner after Louisiana Tech (20-36) tied the score in the top half on Jay Howell's RBI double and a two-out error.

Western's Ryan Hutchison (9-4) allowed four hits in seven-plus innings to earn his seventh consecutive victory. Nathan Isenberg pitched two scoreless innings for his sixth save. Tech reliever Chad Darnell (3-3) was the loser.

Western will play No. 2 Southwestern Louisiana, an 18-0 winner over Arkansas-Little Rock today in the double-elimination tournament.

AROUND KENTUCKY

Hilltoppers fall 9-2 in Sun Belt tourney

From Special Dispatches

Southwestern Louisiana pounded Western Kentucky 9-2 yesterday in the second round of the Sun Belt Conference baseball tournament in Metairie, La., dropping the Hilltoppers into the losers' bracket.

Eric Templet (7-4) pitched a seven-hitter. The Ragin' Cajuns, meanwhile, pounded Western starter Josh Novotney (8-4) for 13 hits and all nine runs in five-plus innings. Three relievers followed, giving up just one more hit.

Bellarmine College second baseman Michael Bush, a freshman from St. Xavier High School, made the All-Great Lakes Valley Conference first team after leading the league in hitting at .403. Junior first baseman David Masterson and senior outfielder John Eichberger made the second team.

Awards

Northern Kentucky University basketball player Shannon Smith won the Richard F. Schaff Paragon Award as the GLVC's top female student-athlete.

The senior from Fort Jennings, Ohio, averaged 16.5 points a game to help the Norse to a 30-3 record last season and set a school record by shooting 56.4 percent in her career. She's also a four-time GLVC All-Academic selection.

Cumber­land University of Tennessee edged Kentucky's Cumberland College and Georgetown College for the Mid-South Conference's all-sports trophy for the 1998-99 school year.

The Tennessee school won or shared titles in five sports and earned 65 points, while Cumberland College (62) and Georgetown (61) finished first in four sports apiece.

Tennis

The 13th-ranked University of Kentucky men's team will take on No. 2 Duke in the NCAA Sweet 16 Saturday morning in Athens, Ga.

UK (17-9), which is making its 11th NCAA Tournament appearance, hopes to avenge a 4-3 loss at Duke (24-4) on March 21.
WKU baseball advances in Sun Belt tourney

SPECIAL WIRE REPORT

T.J. Freeman and Kevin Clutter each hit a home run to lead Western Kentucky to a 9-2 Sun Belt Conference Tournament victory over Arkansas-Little Rock yesterday in New Orleans.

WKU (36-23) moves on in the tourney to play at 3 p.m. today against South Alabama.

Freeman and Jeff Vance led the 12-hit Hilltopper attack with three hits apiece, and Anthony Saporito had two RBI. Matt Idlett also extended his hitting streak to 18 games for WKU, a Sun Belt season-best.

Ryan Houdek (7-4) kept UALR off the board for five innings before giving up his only two runs in the sixth. Houdek went six innings and allowed two runs on six hits with a walk and three strikeouts to pick up the win.

UALR starter Doug Gibson (1-8), the first of four Trojan pitchers, took the loss after giving up five runs on eight hits and four walks with a strikeout.
Hilltoppers two victories away from NCAA Tournament

By the Daily News

NEW ORLEANS — Two wins today and a 19-year drought for Western Kentucky University's baseball program.

Faced with elimination twice Friday, the Hilltoppers pulled out a pair of impressive wins in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament to advance to today's championship.

Third-seeded Western defeated No. 1 seed South Alabama 6-5 Friday afternoon before dispatching No. 2 seed Southwestern Louisiana 6-0 Friday night.

Western (38-23) must defeat fourth-seeded Florida International twice today to win the tournament championship and receive the Sun Belt's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. Western has advanced to the NCAA Tournament just once in school history — in 1980.

Western and Florida International (42-17), which has not lost in the double-elimination tournament, will meet at 1 p.m. today at Zephyr Field. If Western wins, the two teams would play again at approximately 4:30 p.m.

WBGN-AM (1340) will broadcast both games live.

Western is 3-0 against Florida International this season, sweeping a three-game series May 8-9 at Nick Denes Field. Western won 4-3 and 8-1 in a doubleheader on May 8. The Hilltoppers completed the sweep with a 10-7 victory May 9.

Ryan Hutchison was the hero against Southwestern Louisiana (37-22) as the Hilltoppers avenged their only loss of the tournament — a 9-2 win by the Ragin' Cajuns on Wednesday that sent Western to the losers' bracket.

Hutchison tossed a six-hit shutout and struck out six to improve his record to 1-0 and 2-0 in the Sun Belt Tournament.

Western got the only run it would need in the first on Tony Saporito's RBI. Bowling Green High School graduate TJ Freeman and Lorenzo Ferguson added solo home runs for the Hilltoppers. Matt Dillard finished 2-for-4 to extend his hitting streak to 20 games.

Freeman and Saporito provided the big hits in the Hilltoppers' win over South Alabama (38-18), ranked 21st in the nation by Baseball America, pulled within 6-5 on Ben Keats' RBI single in the top of the sixth but could pull no closer. Jeff Vance and Warren East High School graduate Nathan Isenberg combined on three innings of scoreless relief to secure the win.

With the scored tied at 4-all, Western rallied for two runs in the bottom of the fifth. Dillard, whose three-run home run gave Western a 4-2 lead in the second, led off the fifth with a hit by pitch. Freeman doubled home Dillard and Saporito singled home Freeman for the two-run edge.

See Page 2B for tournament pairings and results.

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Western Kentucky 101 000 121 - 8 6 1
Southern Kentucky 000 000 0 - 0 0 0
WP - Ryan Hutchison (6-4). LP - Tray Allender (0-3).

South Alabama 202 001 000- 6 0 0
Western Kentucky 040 020 002- 8 8 1
WP - Jay Moyer (4-1). LP - Outinn Moore (0-1). Save - Nathan Isenberg (9).
Western tumbles 3-2 in Sun Belt final

From AP and Special Dispatches

Eric Miller doubled in the ninth inning to drive in pinch-runner Todd Sherbinski, giving Florida International a 3-2 victory over Western Kentucky in the championship game of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament yesterday in New Orleans.

The third-seeded Golden Panthers (43-17), in their first season in the Sun Belt, will receive the league's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. The fourth-seeded Hilltoppers dropped to 38-24.

It was the third time in four tournament games that the Golden Panthers won in their final at-bat. Edwin Franco (1-2) allowed five hits and struck out four in his second complete game of the season. Western's Josh Novotney gave up 10 hits and two runs in 5 2/3 innings.

The NCAA Tournament pairings will be announced tomorrow. Florida International will be making its third straight NCAA appearance and fourth in five years.

Tennis
Ramsey Smith rallied to beat Gustav Pousette 4-6, 7-5, 8-3 at No. 4 singles, clinching second-ranked Duke's 4-2 victory over 13th-ranked Kentucky in the men's NCAA Sweet 16 at Athens, Ga.

The Blue Devils won the doubles point and the No. 3 singles match for a 2-0 lead, but Kentucky tied it with straight-set victories by Johan Hesoun at No. 1 and Edo Bawono at No. 5. Duke won at No. 6 for a 3-2 lead before Smith wrapped it up.

"Today we played a Duke team that was just too good," said coach Dennis Emery, whose Wildcats finished 17-10. "We fought hard, but they were older and had way too much experience for us."

Duke (25-4) will play Louisiana State in the quarterfinals. UK's Carlos Drada will compete in the NCAA singles competition beginning Wednesday in Athens.

Fishing
Mark Rose of Marion, Ky., finished third and earned $20,000 in the Wal-Mart FLW Tour bass tournament on the Mississippi River at Memphis, Tenn.

Gary Klein of Weatherford, Texas, won the $100,000 first prize, and Chuck Economou of Palm Bay, Fla., earned $35,000 for second place.

David Walker of Cannon, Ky., leads the FLW Tour's season standings with 245 points.
Toppers fall in title game

Golden Panthers win automatic bid to NCAA Tourney

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Eric Miller doubled in the ninth inning to drive in pinch runner Todd Sherbinsky, giving Florida International a 3-2 victory Saturday over Western Kentucky in the championship game of the Sun Belt Conference Tournament.

The Golden Panthers (43-17), the third seed and in their first season in the Sun Belt, will receive the league's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. The fourth-seeded Hilltoppers dropped to 38-24.

It was the third time in four tournament games that the Golden Panthers won in their final at bat. Edwin Franco (11-2) allowed five hits and struck out four for Florida International in collecting his second complete game of the season. Hilltopper starter Josh Novotney scattered 10 hits and two runs in 6 2/3 innings before leaving the game.

Jeff Rodriguez led the Golden Panthers with three hits, while Barry Paulk and George Otero collected two apiece. Townsend was the only Western Kentucky player with a multiple-hit game, going 2 for 3 with an RBI. The NCAA Tournament pairings will be announced Monday afternoon. Florida International will make its third consecutive NCAA appearance and its fourth in the last five seasons.
Tourney run ends for Tops

Western bows out in Sun Belt Tournament final

BY JASON FRAKES
The Daily News

NEW ORLEANS – As if the constant replays in his head won’t be enough, Tony Saporito will likely have a nasty bruise as a reminder of what may be the last play of his collegiate baseball career.

Neither the memories nor the pain will be pleasant for the Western Kentucky University senior third baseman. Florida International's Eric Miller smashed a one-hop single off Saporito's right wrist to bring home pinch runner Todd Sherbinsky in the bottom of the ninth inning, giving the Golden Panthers a 3-2 win over Western Kentucky in Saturday's Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship game at Zephyr Field.

Miller's game-winner came with two outs and Sherbinsky on second and tournament Most Valuable Player Barry Paulk at first. Miller smacked the first pitch he saw from Warren East High School graduate and Hilltopper reliever Nathan Isenberg. The ball caromed off Saporito's wrist into foul territory down the left-field line. Sherbinsky scored without a throw to the plate, igniting a mass celebration and giving the Golden Panthers an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

"I replay it all the time," said Saporito of the final play, just more than an hour after it took place.

Added Hilltopper head coach Joel Murray: "(Miller) hit the ball hard. (Saporito) did exactly what he was supposed to do. He tried to take the ball off the chest. If the ball hits in front, he picks it up and throws the guy out."

Instead, the play ended what has been a spectacular late-season run by a Hilltopper club that was 15-16 after an 18-11 loss at Eastern Kentucky on April 8. Since that contest, Western (23-8) has put together a 23-8 campaign and won 17 of its last 21 games.

The question now is if those numbers are good enough for the Hilltoppers to receive an at-large berth to the NCAA Tournament, which the Hilltoppers have played in just once in school history - in 1980.

Along with Florida International (43-17), most prognosticators consider Sun Belt regular-season champion South Alabama (38-18) a lock for the tournament. Western and Southwestern Louisiana (38-22) will both have to sweat through the announcement of pairings Monday when the NCAA will release the 64-team field at 2 p.m. on ESPN.

"I think it's between us and Southwestern," said T.J. Freeman, a Bowling Green High School graduate and Hilltopper first baseman. "I think we've got a pretty good shot. It will just come down to what the (selection) committee decides."

Western would have had to beat Florida International twice Saturday to win the conference tournament. The Golden Panthers entered Saturday's play unbeaten in the double-elimination tournament. Western lost 9-2 to No. 2 seed Southwestern Louisiana on Wednesday before rebounding for a 9-2 win over Arkansas-Little Rock on Thursday and victories over top-seeded South Alabama (6-5) and Southwestern Louisiana (6-0) on Friday.

See TOPS, 3B
Baseball Tops on NCAA bubble

Western learns fate today after a late-season surge

By JASON FRakes
The Daily News
NEW ORLEANS — Western Kentucky University's baseball coach will get to live his own version of Selection Sunday today.

Coach Joel Murrie just hopes his basketball counterparts won't play an indirect spoiling factor.

"Schools in our area are more interested in a sport that has air in the ball than one with seams," Murrie said. "That shouldn't punish a group of young men that I think are deserving of a spot to play for the College World Series."

The Hilltoppers, fresh off a 3-2 loss to Florida International in Saturday's Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship game here, will find out today if they will take the field again this season. The 64-team field for the NCAA Tournament will be released at 2 p.m. today. ESPN will broadcast the announcement live.

The NCAA voted last year to expand the tournament field from 48 to 64 teams, somewhat in response to criticism that too many good teams from outside the South and West - considered college baseball's hotbeds - were being left out.

If Western does get a bid, it would be a direct benefactor of the expanded field. The Hilltoppers have advanced to the NCAA Tournament just once in school history, capturing the Ohio Valley Conference's automatic bid in 1980.

Among the positives for Western are a 23-8 record in its past 31 games, a winning record on the road (12-10) and a three-man rotation of starters - Ryan Hutchison, Josh Novotny and Brian Houdek - all with ERAs of 4.00 or less.

"When they talk about criteria for at-large selection, one of the first things they say is 'Play well late in the year. Play well on the road. Have a solid pitching staff.'" Murrie said. "I don't see a flaw in any of those for us. When you put all of that in the mix, I think we're a viable contender. But we'll see."

Most prognosticators believe at least two Sun Belt teams will make the NCAA Tournament. Florida International has wrapped up the automatic bid, and regular-season champion South Alabama (38-18) is a Top 25 team and potential NCAA power. Western (38-24) and Southwestern Louisiana (38-22) are apparently on the bubble. The Ragin' Cajuns were 5-3 against conference foes were ranked.

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It's his role as college baseball's top agent to interest the committee in his school's case, and Murrie knows that's a tough battle.

"But I'm not a politician," Murrie said. "I'm not a politician. What I do well is coach baseball."

Added Florida International coach Danny Price: "No. 1, I'm really happy that we don't have to worry about (getting in). No. 2, I really feel like there's three other (Sun Belt) teams that are very capable and would do a great job if they go to the regionals. Western Kentucky has played as well as anybody in the last few weeks."

NCAA regionals begin Friday and run through Sunday at 16 sites across the country. Each site will host a four-team, double-elimination tournament with each winner advancing to one of eight super regionals June 4-6. Winners of the best-of-three super regionals advance to the College World Series set for June 11-19 in Omaha, Neb.

Host schools for this week's regionals are Alabama, Arkansas, Auburn, Baylor, Florida State, Houston, Louisiana State, Miami (Fla.), Notre Dame, Ohio State, Southern California, Stanford, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Wake Forest and Wichita State.

"I really feel like we do have a good shot of getting in," Hilltopper third baseman Tony Saporito said. "But we're Western Kentucky. We're not really known for baseball. We're known for basketball. It's up to (the committee) to decide. It's tough that we couldn't win it ourselves. But if that's the way we've got to get in, that's the way we've got to get in."
WKU’s season officially finished

Hilltoppers left out of tournament field, close 38-24

By JEFF NATIONS

The Daily News

Western Kentucky University junior catcher Kevin Clutter has never ended a season quite like this. Instead of watching the Hilltoppers finish the year from behind home plate or perched on a bench in the dugout, Clutter saw his team’s season end Monday on television.

Western, considered a bubble team to receive a bid for this year’s NCAA Tournament, did not get an invitation.

As the field was announced on ESPN, Clutter and his teammates watched their season slip away.

“You lose a game and you know it’s over,” Clutter said. “When you still have a shot to play and then you’re told on the TV that your season is over, it’s kind of a strange way to end a season.”

Western, which hasn’t reached the NCAA Tournament since 1980, thought it had a strong case to earn a berth in this year’s newly expanded 64-team field. The Hilltoppers finished third in the nationally ranked Sun Belt Conference regular season.

And in the Sun Belt Conference Baseball Tournament in New Orleans last week, Western beat NCAA-bound schools South Alabama and Southwestern Louisiana on Friday to reach Saturday’s championship game. The Hilltoppers fell 3-2 to Florida International, which finished fourth in the regular-season standings.

Murrie knew his team’s chances were hurt when Florida International earned the Sun Belt’s automatic bid, giving the conference three schools likely to get bids to the NCAA Tournament.

“They played the best baseball in the tournament,” Western coach Joel Murrie said of the Golden Panthers. “They weren’t the best team during the regular season, but for those four days they were. I think we were the second-best team by the way we performed in the tournament.”

Even with the loss in the Sun Belt Tournament championship game, Murrie still thought Western (38-24) had a shot at more postseason play.

“I think that we were close,” Murrie said. “The (NCAA) selection committee obviously has some difficult decisions to make. To be considered is nice, but obviously it’s disappointing not to be selected.”

Senior first baseman and Bowling Green High School graduate T.J. Freeman was more disappointed than most by the NCAA snub. Freeman, the Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year, and fellow seniors Matt Idlett, Anthony Saporito, Chris Yoo and Warren East High School graduate Nathan Iosenberg weren’t ready to turn in their equipment Monday.

“It’s definitely disappointing,” Freeman said. “We came into today thinking we had a good chance. I don’t know how the whole thing works.”

Clutter said he and his teammates knew their best chance for an NCAA bid would be in the regionals at Columbus, Ohio, or South Bend, Ind. ESPN announced those two four-team pairings last, and the Hilltoppers weren’t among them.

“One of our goals was going to the (NCAA) regionals and we felt a little bit short,” Clutter said. “We kind of knew we were competing against Florida International in the Sun Belt Tournament and they stepped it up. We knew we were on the bubble, but we thought we had a shot.

“A slim shot, but a shot.”
WKU players make South Regional team

Three Western Kentucky University baseball players were named by the National Collegiate Baseball Writers Association as selections to its South Regional squad Tuesday.

Senior first baseman T.J. Freeman, senior right-fielder Chris Yeo and junior right-handed pitcher Josh Novotney were all named to the South Regional second team.

Freeman, the Sun Belt Conference's Player of the Year, hit .336 for the Hilltoppers this season. Freeman led the team in home runs (18) and RBIs (61). His 32 career home runs ranked sixth for all time at Western.

Yeo led the Hilltoppers in hitting with a .349 batting average. He also led the team in runs (64), triples (5) and walks (59).

Novotney compiled an 8-4 record with a 3.78 ERA. He pitched seven complete games, including two shutouts. Novotney also set a Hilltopper season record for strikeouts with 102.
Western Kentucky University signs Matthew Wilhite, picked the Kentucky Colonels' 17- and 18-year-olds baseball team to a 5-4 win over Puerto Rico Sunday during the Kentucky Colonels Firecracker Classic.

The right-hander from Franklin tallied 13 strikeouts while allowing five hits in six innings.
Purple inks to play baseball at Western

By JASON FRAKES
The Daily News

For Kenneth Yaeger, it was better to sign late than never.

After establishing himself as one of Kentucky's top catchers during his senior season at Bowling Green High School, Yaeger still had no place to play collegiately as recently as last week.

"When June and July started rolling around, I started to get worried," Yaeger said. "I knew then that I had to find a place to go somewhere."

Enter Western Kentucky University and coach Joel Murrie, who just happened to need another catcher on the roster. Murrie had followed Yaeger since his Little League days and offered him a place on the squad.

Yaeger signed with Western on June 30.

"We're excited to have him," said Murrie, whose Hilltoppers finished 38-24 last season after losing to Florida International in the Sun Belt Conference championship game.

"Last fall, we did not have a need for a catcher behind the plate. ... At the end of the year, we had some kids who decided to leave the program, which opened the door for a need for a catcher."

Yaeger hit .470 for the Purples last spring, leading Bowling Green to a 13-21 record and a trip to the Fourth Region Tournament. But more impressive than Yaeger's numbers was his versatility. Along with batting leadoff for the Purples, Yaeger pitched, played all four infield positions and played in the outfield.

Yaeger is the third Fourth Region player to sign with the Hilltoppers this season. joining Greenwood product Tim Freeman and Franklin-Simpson graduate Matthew White. Those two will join fellow Fourth Region graduates George Cole (Greenwood) and Justin Lawrence (Franklin-Simpson), who were on Western's roster last season.
Hilltoppers to open with tough opponent.

Western Kentucky University's baseball team will open up its 2000 season against national powerhouse Florida State in January.

The Hilltoppers will travel to Tallahassee, Fla., to play three games with the College World Series runner-up Seminoles Jan. 28-30.

"I love our schedule," said Western coach Joel Mierie. "We get tested right out of the gate. We'll be playing a team who will definitely be ranked in the preseason. We plan to pick up right where we left off, which was the Sun Belt Conference championship game.

"We're playing a team who has been where we want to get — the championship game of the College World Series."

The schedule was released late Tuesday.

Here's a look at the Hilltoppers' 2000 schedule:

Jan. 28 - at Florida State
Jan. 29 - at Florida State
Jan. 30 - at Florida State
Feb. 19 - St. Louis (DH)
Feb. 20 - St. Louis
Feb. 21 - at Bemont
Feb. 22 - at Louisiana
Feb. 25 - Purdue
Feb. 26 - Ohio
Feb. 27 - Ohio
Feb. 28 - at Murray State
March 1-3 - Minne State
March 4 - North Dakota State
March 5 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
March 6 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
March 7 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
March 8 - at Florida International
March 9 - at Florida International
March 10 - Louisville
March 11 - Louisiana Tech (DH)
March 12 - Louisiana Tech
March 13 - at Southern Miss
March 14 - at Southern Miss
March 15 - at Southern Miss
March 16 - at Southern Miss
March 17 - at Arkansas State
March 18 - at Arkansas State
March 19 - at Arkansas State
March 20 - at Kentucky
March 21 - at Kentucky
March 22 - at Kentucky
March 23 - at Kentucky
March 24 - at Kentucky
March 25 - at Kentucky
March 26 - at Kentucky
March 27 - at Kentucky
March 28 - at Kentucky
March 29 - at Kentucky
March 30 - at Kentucky
March 31 - South Alabama
April 1 - at South Alabama
April 2 - at South Alabama
April 3 - at Middle Tennessee State
April 4 - Tennessee Tech
April 5 - Austin Peay
April 6 - Austin Peay
April 7 - New Orleans
April 8 - New Orleans
April 9 - Austin Peay
April 10 - Eastern Kentucky
April 11 - at Eastern Kentucky
April 12 - at Arkansas State
April 13 - at Arkansas State
April 14 - at Arkansas State
April 15 - at Arkansas State
April 16 - at Arkansas State
April 17 - at Arkansas State
April 18 - at Austin Peay
April 19 - Kentucky
April 20 - at Louisiana-Lafayette
April 21 - at Louisiana-Lafayette
April 22 - at Louisiana-Lafayette
April 23 - at Vandy
April 24 - at Middle Tennessee State
April 25 - at Tennessee State
April 26 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
April 27 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
April 28 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
April 29 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
April 30 - at Arkansas-Little Rock
May 1 - at Florida International
May 2 - at Florida International
May 3 - at Florida International
May 4 - at Florida International
May 5 - at Florida International
May 6 - at Florida International
May 7 - at Florida International
May 8 - at Kentucky
May 9 - at Kentucky
May 10 - at Kentucky
May 11 - at Kentucky
May 12 - at Kentucky
May 13 - at Kentucky
May 14 - Sun Belt Conference Tournament DH
May 15 - Sun Belt Conference Tournament DH
May 16-18 - Sun Belt Conference Tournament DH
May 19-20 - Sun Belt Conference Tournament DH - Doubleheader

- Sun Belt Conference game
- at South Alabama
WKU baseball signs nine players to team

The Western Kentucky University baseball team inked nine players during the early fall signing period in November.

Among the Hilltoppers’ signees are right-handed pitchers Ryan Bicondoa and Tyler Comer, left-handed pitcher Grady Hinchman, catchers Tito Rivera, Josh Wilson and Blake Crigger, third baseman Randy Lewis and Justin Herrguth and first baseman-pitcher Brent Miller.

Bicondoa and Rivera will both join Western from Lassen Junior College – the same school that produced former Hilltopper all-Sun Belt Conference player Chris Yeo. Bicondoa was a first-team all-conference selection as a freshman last year, striking out 44 in 55 innings. He allowed just 16 walks and notched a 1.30 earned run average.

Hinchman was an all-tournament selection at the National Baseball Federation 16-and-under World Series and played on the Indiana Bulls for five seasons.

Comer had a 5-1 record last season with Camden County High School in Savannah, Ga., last season to lead his team to the Region 3-AAAA crown.

Wilson also is from Savannah, Ga. Lewis completes the Georgia trio, having played at Lassiter High School in Marietta, Ga.

Crigger is the second member of the 2004 class to be an NABF all-tournament team selection.

Herrguth will join the Hilltoppers in January and will be eligible to play in the upcoming season. The junior college transfer was a first-team all-conference and was first-team all-North California at Santa Rosa Junior College.