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Haskins hopes to lose monkey

By LEE GRACE

Back in November, the proverbial monkey was placed on Coach Clem Haskins' back. The Ohio Valley Conference coaches picked Western to repeat as conference champions.

The monkey almost died. Haskins' team has dodged bullets from Murray, Middle Tennessee and Morehead. It forgot to duck at Tennessee Tech.

Haskins never was thrilled about being picked for the top spot. "I'd rather start out in the middle and work my way up," he said. "It's tough being at the top because there's only one way you can go, and that's down."

But Western won a share of the conference title and the right to be the host for the tournament.

The monkey jumped off Haskins' back and is now chattering in the ears of the other coaches.

Western (18-4) comes into tonight's 9:15 game with a four-game winning streak. And the Toppers have won eight straight times in Diddle Arena and boast an 11-2 overall home record this season.

The Toppers have haven't played since they beat Northern Iowa 75-67 in Cedar Falls, Iowa last Saturday.

That is Haskins worried.

"Anytime that you only have one game in two weeks, it's going to hurt," Haskins said. "Practice is one thing, but you need to play every two or three days. Your timing is going to be off, and the defense may not be as sound as you don't play."

And tonight would be the worst time for rust to set in, especially against Morehead.

The Eagles (17-9) owns a 59-57 decision over Western, and Haskins knows his team must be ready.

"You can't take away the fact that they have excellent talent," Haskins said. "We need to keep them from putting the ball in the hole; we have to keep pressure on them."

Haskins probably wishes that the news of Western's interest in the Sun Belt Conference could have been kept under wraps until after the tournament.

"If I was a coach coming in against Western, I would use it to fire up my team," Haskins said. "Morehead's coach (Wayne Martin) is going to tell his team that this is Western's last game in the conference which will add more kindle to the fire."

Haskins believes, though, that senior center Craig McCormick could be the person to put out the Morehead fire.

McCormick comes into tonight's game as Western's leading scorer with a 14.1 average, rebounder (5.9 per game), field goal percentage (.564) and free throw shooter (75%).

And Haskins said he thinks the game would be won — except for the center position — where Western will have the edge.

But there's another key for Western. It could be everyone's all-world preseason pick Tony Wilson.

Wilson has come on of late, boosting his scoring average to 11.6 points per game.

And the probable return of Western's sixth man, Percy White, who has missed the past month with a broken right hand, could give Western that extra push into the NCAA tournament.

Haskins certainly would like the monkey to carry him for awhile.

Photo by Jim Gensheimer

Western's head coach Clem Haskins discusses strategy with his team during a time out.

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Eagles ride to tournament on blue streak

BY MARK MATHIS

Morehead enters the Ohio Valley Conference Tournament on a roll. The Eagles have won 11 of their last 13 games to beat out Tennessee Tech for a spot in the tournament. Morehead and Western last met in the OVC tournament in Richmond in 1978. Western won a tough 96-95 decision.

And after a year's absence from the tournament, Morehead is back to play Western again. Game time is 9:15 tonight.

Morehead and Western have split games this year. The Eagles hit 21 of 24 free throws to defeat the Toppers 59-57 in early January in Morehead.

But the Eagles got grounded in Bowling Green a month later, 68-63.

Bobby Jones got 11 of his game-high 15 points in the second half and was instrumental in what Coach Clem Haskins called a "crucial win" for the Toppers. One factor in Morehead's loss was Western's defense. "It's very important for us to have Western play in a man-to-man defense," Morehead coach Wayne Martin said. "Western's zone is extremely effective because of their size," Martin said.

Martin, the OVC's co-Coach of the Year, says the man who makes things go for the Eagles is Guy Minnfield. The 6-4 guard is leading the Eagles in scoring with 14.7 points a game and assists with three a game. He has 74 assists for the year.

"He is a complete player," Martin said. "He plays good defense and has relatively few turnovers."

Two other Morehead players are averaging in double figures. Glenn Napier is scoring at an 11.4 clip and Norris Beckley is averaging 10.8 points a game.

"We like for Glenn to shoot often," Martin said. "He has been hitting 45 percent over the last 11 games."

Martin said his team has gained confidence over the last part of the season. "Tennessee Tech really kept the pressure on us, but we thought we'd make it to the tournament," Martin said. "We knew it was important to win at home, and the win at Murray was a big one."

Will Western's rumored move to the Sun Belt Conference give his team added incentive?

"Well, we can all read, and it's definitely a factor," Martin said. "With everything in the newspapers talking about Western being the class of the league and now leaving, it reflects negatively on the rest of the conference," he said.

Martin says he knows three things that will happen in tonight's game. "We're going to take care of the basketball, play good defense and we're going to get outrebounded."

"For us to win," Martin said, "we've got to shoot 50 percent and keep Western below 45 percent."
MIDDLE TENNESSEE
Raiders can take big prize
By TOMMY GEORGE

Stan Simpson's Middle Tennessee Blue Raiders are like mice trying to snatch a savory hunk of cheese from a deadly trap.

Last year his talented squad finished 18-9 — roasting the Hilltoppers in Murfreesboro, 62-54, in the regular-season finale. But in the first round of the Ohio Valley Conference tourney, the Blue Raiders lost a 62-60 overtime heartbreaker to Murray.

The trap just snapped too quickly.

Simpson's five starters returned this season to compile a 19-7 mark, winning six of their last seven games. He says this Middle team is playing the best basketball he's seen at Middle during his three years at the helm.

And as the Blue Raiders prepare for their battle against Murray, 20-6, in first round OVC tournament action, Simpson hopes his squad can steal the big cheese.

Middle meets Murray at 7 tonight in Diddle Arena.

"I'm now very pleased with the way we've been playing," Simpson said. "We've had a good season and even though there were two or three more games we could have won, you have to be pleased when you win 19 games in today's college basketball."

Simpson thinks a key to the season was his team's embarrassing 65-49 loss to Western here in January.

"Since that game we've become more together on offense and have started looking for each other on both ends of the floor," he said.

"I know a little too much about Murray State," Simpson said with a laugh. "They are well coached, don't make mistakes and take advantage of your mistakes. Simpson recognizes Murray's exciting players, but relishes in the fact that he has the conference's best performer."

Six-foot, seven-inch senior forward Jerry Beck of Danville, Va. "Without a doubt, Jerry Beck is one of the best three players to ever play at Middle Tennessee," Simpson said. "I've never seen a player generate so much respect from his team, he's too selfish on the court, and gets the big play in the big situation. A key to our team the last three weeks has not only been his performance, but his leadership."

Starting with Beck is 5-10 junior guard Ed "Pancakes" Perry; 6-4 senior guard Rick Campbell; 6-6 senior forward Lucious Hall; and 6-6 senior center Chris Harris.

"I'm most concerned about Murray State controlling the tempo of the game," Simpson said. "They can pull that thing out and make you chase them all night."

Though his teams have not fared well in Diddle Arena, Simpson said this time his squad "should be ready to play."

Middle Tennessee's Jerry Beck, two-time Ohio Valley Conference player of the year, fights Western's Bobby Jones for the ball. Middle plays Murray at 7 tonight.
Fan-atic

Pictures and story
by BOBBY ROE

Ken Johnson knows each basketball player as if he were his own son.

He has spent years watching his team, yelling instructions and encouraging them to play better.

Out of the arena, he is calm.

But if the team is having a bad night, he verbally attacks the referees with a ferocity akin to that of a wild animal.

A few minutes before the game starts, the Hundred Club member journeys across the auxiliary gym to his seat eight rows from the floor. He never takes more than two or three steps without stopping to talk.

The game begins.

The calm, dignified Hundred Club member jumps from his seat, yelling at referees and wringing the fibers from his red towel.

"The basketball provides a little release from work," he said at halftime, calmly.

After a tough second half of yelling, he quietly left the arena — and basketball — behind.

Until another game.

Zacharias among top six

President Donald Zacharias is one of six finalists being considered for president of the University of Wyoming, the Wyoming Board of Trustees president announced yesterday.

According to a press release issued yesterday, Zacharias said he would give the position careful consideration.

"My action is in no way an expression of dissatisfaction with any aspect of my career at Western," he said. "This is simply a major professional opportunity that merits further consideration."

The other five candidates are Donald L. Veal, Wyoming's acting president; Morton Weir, psychology professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; John W. Strong, interim academic affairs vice-chancellor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; W.L. Faaberg, Texas state geologist and director of the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas-Austin; and Gregory Prince, associate provost at Dartmouth College.

Leo P. McCue, Board of Trustees president, said a three-member trustee committee will arrange interviews and campus visits before recommending its nominee to the board.

Ken Johnson, a lifelong Western basketball fan, chews on his red towel to relieve tension during the Tennessee Tech game.

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FOLK CRAFTS

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Sideline: Handicapped fan roots for Tops from wheelchair

BY MARK HEATH

The 13-year-old boy, wearing a red Western sweater, sits in the corner at the end of the basketball court.

A large red towel hangs behind him. He has used masking tape to spell out “Go Big Red” on the towel.

As Troy Liscomb watches preparations for the coming game, Diddle Arena slowly fills up.

It will happen again tonight. People slowly file to their seats, some stopping by to say hello. He watches as Western takes the floor and begins warming up.

As the opposing team trails past him after its own warmups, he shouts a resounding “Booo!”

Beside him, his father, Bill, stands dressed in a Western shirt and red hat, talking to his son and watching the activity.

Once the game begins, Troy chants with the cheerleaders, “Heads up, defense. Heads up, defense.”

He is like any other avid basketball fan in Diddle Arena — complete with the towel.

Except for one thing. He is confined to a wheelchair by muscular dystrophy.

He and his father have been coming to Western’s home games for the past five years, ever since Troy’s weakening muscles confined him to the chair. They also travel to many of Western’s away games.

At each game, Troy has a big Red puppet on his left foot. The puppet’s namesake stops by regularly.

Troy thinks Western’s games with Murray and Middle Tennesse were this season’s best. But when he was reminded of Western’s loss at Murray Jan. 21, he quickly said, “Yeah, but we don’t talk about that one.”

He often decorates his wheelchair for special events.

“It’ll be all decorated up if we win the tournament,” his father said. “We’re thinking about putting flashing lights on it and everything.”

And Troy has been practically adopted by Western’s team.

“It’s a thrill to see him every night at a game,” Coach Clem Haskins said. “He is excited to see me, and I get excited to see him. When we go on the road, we have a tendency to look for him at the game.”

“Because he is pulling for us, (it) makes the guys play a little harder.”

Troy is proud of Haskins. “He shakes my hand and I wish him luck. He’s a great coach.”

Center Craig McCormick said the team began to notice Liscomb when he decorated his chair at the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament opening round last year in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

“He was right down there on the floor and he showed a lot of faith toward the team,” McCormick said.

“It’s unfortunate the position he is in, and it makes us all feel proud to be gilled the way we are,” McCormick said. “You don’t appreciate your own ability until you see someone who isn’t as fortunate as you are.”

For Western’s last home game, Troy made Western’s four seniors a small, basketball-shaped plaque.


Every fan has his favorite player. Troy’s is junior Percy White.

He said White is good. “He shoots good and he blocks shots.”

“Troy is my buddy,” White said. “Every time we come out, he says hello and we shake hands. He is one of our biggest fans, and I’m glad to see him out there every time we play.”

Liscomb said he thinks his son likes White for maybe another reason.

“He isn’t a starter — and that’s kind of the way Troy is,” he said. “But he’s been everything you can give it his all, and while Troy does the same thing. He tries to give it his all in whatever he does, but he can’t really do that much.”

“He’s pretty hard for him to do anything, but he tries. That’s the biggest thing, we’ve got to keep trying,” Liscomb said.

The Liscombs moved to Bowling Green five years ago so they could be close to Vanderbilt Hospital, where Troy is treated. His younger brother also has muscular dystrophy, but he’s still too young to come to ballgames.

“Troy can’t do a lot of things, but he does have a great personality,” his father said.

“And he wants to do other things and likes to see other people excel, rather than sit in a shell and complain that he can’t get out there and play basketball or anything else. He likes to see the other guys do what he can’t do.”

Haskins said the boy’s spirit means a lot to the team.

“I’m just amazed, I admire somebody like that for his courage and power and his willingness to not become complacent,” Haskins said.

“He enjoys coming to basketball games,” Liscomb said. “I can see that he lives and dies with Western Kentucky basketball, and if there’s anything we can do to make his life exciting and enjoyable, we are going to do it.”

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MURRAY

Racers make OVC tournament despite losing standout guard

By MARK HEATH

When Murray's star player, Mont Sleet, broke his foot in early December at Southern Illinois, a lot of people marked the Racers off their list of Ohio Valley Conference contenders.

Even Murray coach Ron Greene now says he didn't expect his team to tie with Western for the regular-season championship without his flashy point guard.

But the Racers surprised themselves — and OVC opponents — with wins over Western, Middle and Morehead, the three other teams in this year's tournament.

The Racers also swept Notre Dame and Missouri Valley champion Bradley on the road while compiling a 20-4 record.

"I think sometimes when you lose a star player, the other guys try to come together, maybe play together and do some things they wouldn't do otherwise," Greene said.

Greene will find out tonight at 7 just how good the Racers are as they and third-place Middle Tennessee open the tournament.

Murray is making its third straight trip to the OVC tournament in Diddle Arena. During the last two years, the Racers have fought their way to the tournament finals, only to lose to Western.

This year, Murray will have its work cut out again. At Middle Jan. 21, the Racers pulled out a 59-58 win.

Then Middle, which finished its season 19-7, beat the Racers 70-53 a month later at Racer Arena.

Greene said he believes Middle and Murray are evenly matched.

"They certainly match us with quickness, and I think they are a little stronger physically than we are," Greene said. "Personally, I picked Middle to win it all, and I have a respect for them. I think talent-wise they are every bit as good as, or better than, us. They are a veteran ballclub.

"The Racers rely on three players — 6-foot-7 junior transfer Ricky Hood, 6-4 junior Glen Green and 6-5 senior Michael Murdock.

"Middle is probably Ray's biggest surprise. He was the last player Greene recruited as a coach at Mississippi State. In two years there, he transferred to Murray.

In his first OVC season, Hood averaged 13.3 points and hit 58 percent of his shots from the field.

Green is a steady performer for the Racers, averaging 15 points a game and he has 128 assists for the season — the most in the conference. Greene describes Hammond as an explosive player who, if he has a couple of good games, could be the deciding factor for Murray.

The Racers will show confidence in close games. The team has had 12 games, including four overtime games, decided by five points or fewer. They have won 10 of those games.

Even if Murray doesn't win the tournament title — and the automatic bid to the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament — the game isn't over. Murray is still a strong contender for the National Invitational Tournament or even an at-large berth in the NCAA tournament.

OVC winner

may advance to Mideast

By LEE GRACE

The rail to the national basketball championship is about to narrow.

From Maine to Hawaii, conference tournaments are underway; it will all culminate March 28 in New Orleans, La., with the finals of the 44th NCAA basketball championship.

For most schools, the path to the finals ends suddenly — often without warning, often without compassion.

Western found out last year in its 93-68 loss to Alabama-Birmingham.

The winner of the Ohio Valley — tournament regular — will play Vanderbilt, Tenn., on either March 11 or 12 in the Mideast Regional.

Mideast games also will be played at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, Ind., on March 12 or 14. The regional finals will be in Birmingham, Ala.

The OVC tournament winner will find out at 2 p.m. Sunday which team it will play, when and where.

Every team in the NCAA tournament is given a seed determined by a computer-calculated Rating Percentage Index. It is based on a team's Division I winning percentage, opponents' success and strength of schedule and success on the road. This is the second time that the computer has been used.

The 16 teams with the highest rating would receive first-round byes.

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