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WKU FOOTBALL

WKU's triple-option prep dates long before Army week

Toppers defense ready for unique challenge vs. triple option

ELLIOTT PRATT epratt@bgdailynews.com 10 hrs ago

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers linebacker Clay Davis (30) tackles UAB Blazers running back Spencer Brown (4) during WKU's 20-13 win over UAB on Saturday, September 28, 2019, at Houchens-Smith Stadium. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

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Austin Anthony

There's a special discipline that comes with playing a military academy or another program that prides itself on the triple-option.

That's why as soon as the schedule lends itself to appropriate preparation for that system, it's malpractice not to start familiarizing a team with how to stop it.

"You wouldn't have a chance at all if you didn't start in January like we did," Western Kentucky defensive coordinator Clayton White said. "We'd really be out here chasing, running around and looking wild, but that gives us confidence and a chance to at least line up to the formations, play hard and fight and make some plays to come out on top."

WKU (3-2 overall, 3-0 Conference USA) takes a break from the conference grind to host Army (3-2) at 6 p.m. Saturday at Houchens-Smith Stadium. It's the first time since 2014 that the Hilltoppers have played either Army or Navy, meaning no one on WKU's team has had to prep for the disciplines of a team that lives and dies by the triple-option.

Louisville is the closest opponent that runs a similar scheme, White said, but even the Cardinals run that out of spread formations unlike the traditional option teams. Even his time prepping there goes back to when he was safeties coach at North Carolina State playing against Georgia Tech.

"It provides a unique challenge," defensive end Juwuan Jones said. "It's a change of pace from teams that usually run the spread. Not too many run triple-option. It's going to test our discipline and everyone doing their job on every play."

Army provides a well-timed opportunity for WKU to capitalize on its best defensive performance of the season. The Hilltoppers held Old Dominion out of the end zone in a 20-3 win and kept the Monarchs to just 163 yards of offense. WKU produced one turnover a week after it earned four interceptions against UAB.

WKU hasn't allowed a touchdown in the fourth quarter and ranks second in C-USA behind UAB in overall defense allowing 303 yards per game and third in run defense at 109.8 yards per game. White was quick to point out it wasn't just the defense's performance that stood out, but the offense pieced together drives late in the game that helped make the job on the other side of the ball easier.

"The team itself, really all things came together," White said. "We found a way to win and that's been a struggle for us in the past couple of seasons, to find that way. We didn't give up a touchdown but the offense helped in that by keeping our butts on the sideline while they're out there marching the ball down the field. That's huge."

Even White acknowledged that Army presents a challenge like no other, hence the dedicated periods in the spring and fall camps to defending this offense.

Army averages 273 yards per game on the ground behind running back Connor Slomka's 4.2 yards per carry and quarterback Kelvin Hopkins Jr. averaging four yards per carry. Although coming off a loss at Tulane, Army showed more balance on offense with 170 passing yards to go

with 193 rushing yards. Running back Brandon Walters and receiver Camden Harrison had respective receptions of 37 and 36 yards in that game.

Awareness of the downfield threat is what White is harping this week to his defensive backs.

“We want to see what kind of complete defense we are,” White said. “We’ve shown that we can run and hit and make plays and this is a test of our toughness and a test of our discipline.

“The discipline is the main thing we preach on the back end because our mistakes show up on the scoreboard. It’s different this week because of the style of play, but our disciplines haven’t changed.”

— Follow WKU athletics beat writer Elliott Pratt on Twitter @EPrattBGDN or visit bgdailynews.com.

Elliott Pratt

Covering the Western Kentucky University athletics beat for the Bowling Green Daily News.