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TOP STORY

WKU men's basketball

## WKU enjoys national exposure during NIT run

Hilltoppers will play third straight nationally televised game Tuesday at MSG

By ELLIOTT PRATT [epratt@bgdailynews.com](mailto:epratt@bgdailynews.com) Mar 24, 2018

Western Kentucky men's basketball coach Rick Stansbury talks to his players during WKU's 92-84 win over Oklahoma State on Wednesday during the National Invitation Tournament quarterfinals in Stillwater, Okla.

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When Taveion Hollingsworth fell on the baseline after making a shot in a packed Gallagher-Iba Arena at Oklahoma State on Wednesday night, he turned and lifted his jersey so the crowd – and ESPN's nearby television cameras – could read “Western Kentucky” on the front.

As special as the run in the National Invitation Tournament has been for the Hilltoppers themselves, it's brought even more exposure to WKU as a whole.

“You can't buy this kind of publicity,” WKU's lone four-year senior Justin Johnson said.

Sure, WKU would rather have tried to make a run in the NCAA Tournament, but three victories against Power 5 schools in the NIT have WKU in the tournament's final four and on its way to the media capital of the world this week in New York.

The Hilltoppers (27-10) will face Utah (22-11) at 6 p.m. CDT at Madison Square Garden on Tuesday night on ESPN. The winner will play either Mississippi State or Penn State in Thursday's NIT championship game at MSG.

To reach New York, WKU earned a home victory against Boston College and road wins at Southern California and Oklahoma State – the latter two of which were aired on ESPN2.

WKU's postseason run has brought the best out of the Hilltoppers against the nation's best leagues. WKU is 5-2 this season against the top seven leagues in Division I between the American Athletic, Atlantic Coast, Big East, Big Ten, Big 12, Pacific-12 and Southeastern Conference.

The exposure WKU's brand receives by playing nationally televised games against upper-tier opponents is one Hilltopper athletics has enjoyed the past few years with the past success of football and now men's basketball.

The football team won three straight bowl games from 2014-16 and finished the 2015 season ranked in the AP Top 25.

Coach Rick Stansbury said he saw the direct benefits a team's success can have on a university when Mississippi State made its NIT semifinal appearance in 2007. WKU's second-year coach said he remembered "admissions enrollment jumped up 3,000 people because of that run" when he coached MSU.

Several mid-major schools have benefited as such when basketball teams make a tournament run. According to a Bloomberg analysis of Department of Education data, Florida Gulf Coast University saw a 27.5 percent surge in admission applications when it made its Sweet 16 run in the 2013 NCAA Tournament, and the school's website tripled its norm to more than 100,000 visitors.

When Wichita State made its Final Four run in 2013, the school saw a 29 percent application increase.

“This is something for Western Kentucky,” Stansbury said. “The amount of publicity we’ve gotten and are continuing to get, there’s no money value on that right now. Going to New York right now, being the only (men’s) team in the state of Kentucky still playing, how much effect does that have on students making decisions on where they’re going to college? Believe it or not, it has a lot of impact, because they see Western Kentucky can be as good as anybody in the country right here at home.

“It’s impactful for everybody: Fans, future students, our players and our team.”

WKU has actually seen an overall decline in enrollment among full-time students. Not counting dual-credit and Gatton Academy students, WKU saw a 3 percent decline in student enrollment from the 2016 fall semester to the 17,215 enrolled this year. WKU’s overall enrollment is down by only 10 students from 2016, bringing total enrollment to 20,267.

The decline also contributes to the nearly \$15 million budget shortfall the university is currently addressing, \$1 million of which will be cut from the athletics department.

WKU’s current \$23 million athletic budget ranks 12th among the 14 members of Conference USA. By comparison, USC’s athletic budget nears \$113 million.

“A successful athletics program and, in this instance, a successful team like our men’s basketball program, is in a unique position that can help a university,” WKU athletics director Todd Stewart told the Daily News on Saturday. “It’s no secret the biggest challenge our university has right now is our declining enrollment. A successful athletics program will actually help enrollment grow.”



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Social media metrics provided by the WKU athletic department show the impact the men's basketball team has had during its run in the NIT.

The Facebook page "WKU Hilltopper Basketball" post reach from March 17-24 was 313,522. When WKU defeated Oklahoma State on Wednesday night, the final score graphic on the same page reached 242,887 people with 1,979 shares.

WKU Basketball on Twitter has seen an 89 percent hike in impressions (2.98 million) in the last 28 days. The same final score graphic from the Oklahoma State win reached 101,898 impressions and jumped to 388,329 impressions the day after the game.

WKU's main website (wku.edu) had 6,970 page views nine days prior to WKU's game against USC on March 19. Between the Hilltoppers games at USC and OSU – a three-day stretch – page views jumped to 16,947.

Basketball legend Bill Walton worked as ESPN's color commentator during WKU's game at USC. Throughout the broadcast, Walton frequently dropped references about the Hilltoppers and tourism notes about Kentucky.

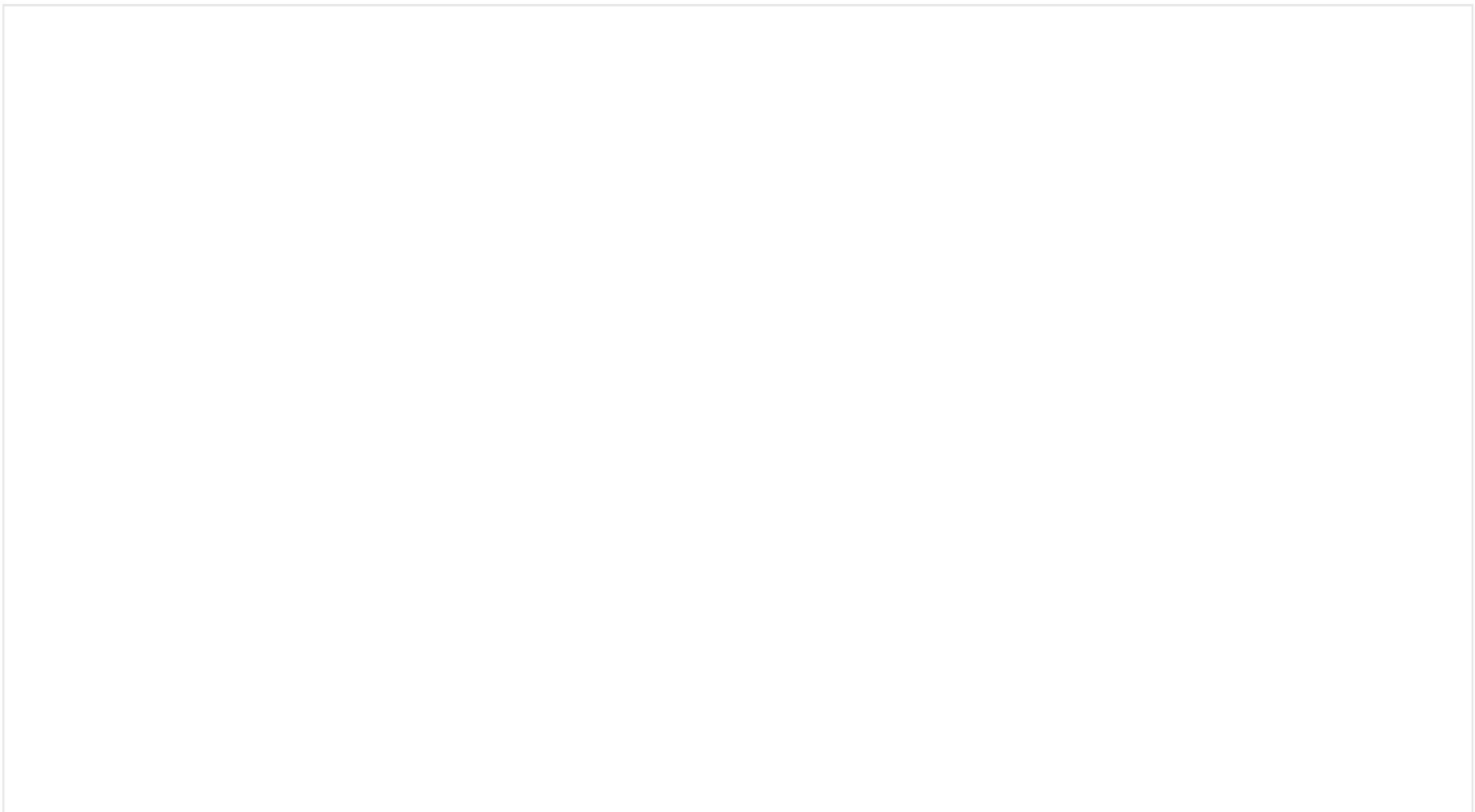
“For him to talk about Western Kentucky, that's why I've seen the impact it can have on colleges and enrollment,” Stansbury said. “People want to be a part of winning and a part of athletic success. You'd be amazed how many students can make decisions on going to an athletic event in college vs. walking through a campus and looking at some concrete and not having the experience of a classroom.”

John Ourand of Sports Business Journal reported WKU's game at Oklahoma State averaged 730,000 viewers on ESPN2. WKU is guaranteed at least one more showcase on national television Tuesday night.

“It's good for the university,” Johnson said. “We've played two games on (ESPN2) and the next one is on ESPN. It's good for the community of Bowling Green and the students who go to Western Kentucky.”{&end}


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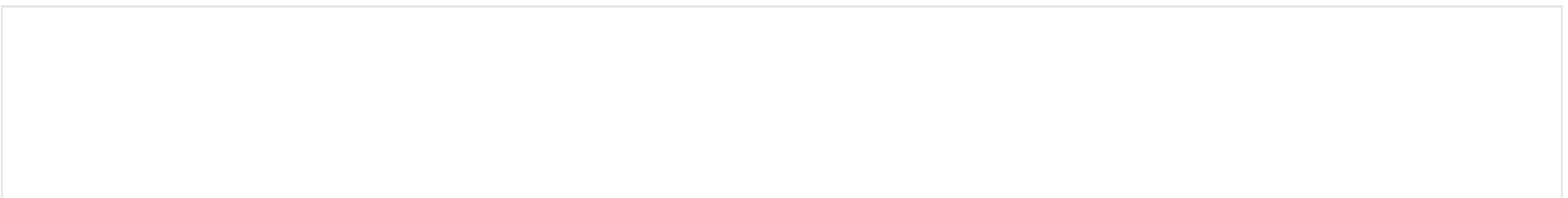


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