



WESTERN KENTUCKY HILLTOPPERS

2024 Record: 8-6 (6-2 C-USA) Conference USA

Bowling Green, KY

Can Toppers Finally Top C-USA?

In two of the past four years, Tyson Helton has had the Hilltoppers in the Conference USA title game, but they have yet to lift the trophy in his tenure. However, they've been the most consistent team in the conference with the most wins in Conference USA in the last three years, five years, and ten years. There are a lot of personnel losses from last year's team including both coordinators, but that's par for the course for teams in the conference and Western Kentucky has survived worse.

As long as the Hilltoppers can put the pieces together and get a portal class of 44 newcomers to gel, they should find themselves in contention for another conference title. The offense was actually one of the worst Helton has had here outside of the 2020 season. Meanwhile, the defense, while severely one dimensional, showed improvement. Outside of a road trip to Baton Rouge in the penultimate week of the season, the schedule lays itself out nicely and gives Big Red every opportunity to achieve their goals this season.

OFFENSE

Pulling a gunslinger out of the portal from the FCS ranks has been a recipe for success in the recent past. Bailey Zappe set college football on fire and tore up the record books and Austin Reed kept the Hilltopper offense chugging along the year after. Helton, and more specifically new offensive coordinator Rick Bowie, brings **Maverick McIvor** to town from Abilene Christian. That's where Bowie comes from too after coaching McIvor to a 3,828 yard performance in a playoff season for the Wildcats where they were ultimately knocked out by the eventual champion North Dakota State Bison.

Who McIvor will throw to is a bit of a mystery with nearly every receiver gone with the exception of **KD Hutchinson** (25 catches, 383 yards, 3 touchdowns). A pair of FCS transfers could find themselves starting on day one. **La'Vell Wright** tallied 609 yards with Austin Peay and **Matthew Henry** starred at Western Illinois with 1,211 yards.

The offensive line is the primary area of concern for the Hilltoppers. It helps that the ball will get out of McIvor's hands quickly, but Western Kentucky hasn't been able to rush the ball at better than a four yard clip the past two seasons and the sack numbers doubled from 2023. Even though the Hilltoppers utilize the air raid offense, they ran the ball nearly as often as they passed (440 rush attempts, 470 pass attempts) so it will be important to bump up their modest 3.5 yards per carry from last season, the worst mark since Helton took over.

DEFENSE

Defense is also a concern and the biggest question mark on the team. That's a big question mark if it spans one entire side of the ball but that's what happens when the top 12 tacklers depart via portal and graduation. On the bright side, a complete refresh allows the Hilltoppers to remedy one of the worst rush defenses in the country. Western Kentucky was simply demolished on the ground in their losses down the stretch of the season to the point where opposing teams didn't even have to throw the ball. Liberty ran wild for 419 yards rushing and two weeks later the Gamecocks steamrolled the Hilltoppers for 386 yards. Therefore, while Western Kentucky was technically a top-ten pass defense in the country, that statistic is highly misleading. Opponents threw the ball only 321 times all season while running 619 times.

A more consistent pass rush would be a good building block new co-defensive coordinators Da'Von Brown and Davis Merritt. **Harper Holloman** impressed in camp and was named the MVP of the spring after making brief appearances in eight games as a true freshman. **Venson Sneed** transfers in from Indiana and he could start on the line next to Hoosier teammate **Robby Harrison**. **Rylen Su'a-Filo** made a name for himself with Southern Utah and he brings needed size at tackle.

Demarko Williams, who played nickelback, is the team's leading returning tackler with 37 tackles, besting what he accrued in two seasons with Ole Miss in a single year. **Jaylen Wester** transfers in after previous stops at Florida Atlantic and Colorado. Cornerbacks **Braxton Myers** (Southern Miss) and **Kent Robinson** bring badly needed starting experience to the table, but there is limited depth.

Preseason Ranking

TBD

HC: Tyson Helton
(7th Year, 48-32)

OC: Rick Bowie
(1st Year)

Co-DC: Da'Von Brown
(1st Year)

Co-DC: Davis Merritt
(1st Year)

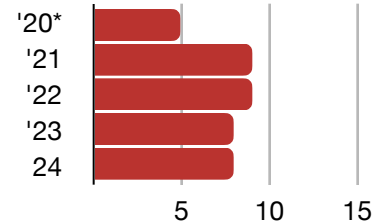
2025 Class Rankings

Recruiting
98

Transfer Portal
74

Via 24/7 Sports

WKU WIN TREND



2024 Results (8-6)

@ Alabama (L 0-63)
E. Kentucky (W 31-0)
@ Mid Tenn (W 49-21)
Toledo (W 26-21)
@ Boston College (L 20-21)
UTEP (W 44-17)
@ Sam Houston (W 31-14)
Kennesaw St. (W 31-14)
@ N Mexico St. (W 41-28)
Louisiana Tech (L 7-12)
@ Liberty (L 21-38)
Jacksonville St. (W 19-17)
@ Jacksonville St. (L 12-52)
Conference USA Championship
vs. JMU* (L 17-27)
Boca Raton Bowl

MARSHALL JACKSON – OL

Photo via Western Kentucky University Athletics

2025 WKU Schedule

Wk		
0	Sat, Aug 23	vs. Sam Houston
1	Sat, Aug 30	vs. North Alabama
2	Sat, Sept 6	@ Toledo
4	Sat, Sept 20	vs. Nevada
5	Sat, Sept 27	@ Missouri State
6	Fri, Oct 3	@ Delaware
8	Tue, Oct 14	vs. FIU
9	Tue, Oct 21	@ Louisiana Tech
10	Sat, Nov 1	vs. New Mexico St.
12	Sat, Nov 15	vs. Mid Tennessee
13	Sat, Nov 22	@ LSU
14	Sat, Nov 29	@ Jacksonville St.

Home Away Neutral

Key Games

Sept 6 @ Toledo: The second game of the home-and-home series. The Hilltoppers head to the Glass Bowl for the first time to face a Rockets team that has high aspirations in the MAC and an offense with skilled, veteran weapons.

Oct 21 @ Louisiana Tech: The Bulldogs lost multiple close games last year but last year's surprising defensive slugfest in Bowling Green was not one of them. With no Liberty on the schedule for WKU, could this be the most impactful game in C-USA play?

Nov 29 @ Jacksonville State: Western Kentucky can get pay back for last year's title game embarrassment.

Player Spotlight

Photo via Bowling Green Daily News



MATTHEW HENRY – WR

Henry’s ascent to the FBS level has been a remarkable journey. An unheralded player with zero recruiting stars produced two solid seasons at the D2 level before exploding for 1,211 yards with Western Illinois. He got better as the season went along with massive performances against Lindenwood (15 catches, 226 yards) and Gardner-Webb (242 yards, 2 touchdowns). He could post major numbers in this offense.

2024 Stats: 64 REC, 1,211 YDS, 6 TDS (FCS)

Photo via Western Kentucky University Athletics



MAVERICK MCIVOR – QB

Not only is McIvor’s name perfectly suited for a gunslinger kind of quarterback, but his style of play is perfect for this offense. He briefly sat the bench for Texas Tech before transferring to Abilene Christian where he was a major producer, guiding the Wildcats to their first ever FCS playoff appearance. Helton has been a quarterback whisperer, especially FCS transfers and McIvor could thrive in Bowling Green.

2024 Stats: 3,828 YDS, 30 TD, 7 INT

Photo via Western Kentucky University Athletics



Houchens Industries-L.T. Smith Stadium (22,000)

Photo via Western Kentucky University Athletics



RD HUTCHINSON

SPECIAL TEAMS

It’ll be a tall task to replace kicker Lucas Cameiro who posted a near-perfect season with 18 of 19 field goals including 6 of 6 from 50 or longer! **John Cannon** has the unenviable task of following Cameiro’s act and he arrives from South Florida. Punter **Cole Maynard** might be the conference’s best.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The formula for Western Kentucky to find success this season will be similar to the past four seasons in which the Hilltoppers have tallied eight or more wins: light up the scoreboard with the passing attack and hang on to survive on defense. As long as McIvor and the offense take an expected step forward, Western Kentucky will be right back into conference contention so long as the defense doesn’t fall off a cliff. Slight regression, especially in scoring offense, wouldn’t be a huge surprise. However, the Hilltoppers do need to at least prevent teams from bludgeoning them in the run game.

The schedule is quite manageable, and the season could very well boil down to how well the Hilltoppers can execute in November and it needs to be different than the 1-4 finish of last season. The conference schedule gives Western Kentucky, in theory, a nice warm up. The first two road games are against the two newest FBS teams. The Toppers miss Liberty in the regular season but it wouldn’t be a surprise to see those teams battle in the title game.

Appointment Television



VS.



Sat, Nov 29 - 2:00 PM ET (TV TBD)

Western Kentucky won a “meaningless” game at home (the conference championship rematch was already set) but got their teeth kicked in by the Jacksonville State ground game which was one of the best in the country. A new coaching staff will make some tweaks on offense for the Gamecocks, but that won’t make a win in the season finale any less sweet for the Hilltoppers especially if a trip to the CUSA title is waiting on the other side.

2024 Statistics

Offense			Defense		
Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank	Statistic	Per Game	FBS Rank
Points	24.9	92	Points	24.6	64
Rushing	108.9	117	Rushing	221.2	130
Passing	264.6	25	Passing	176.1	9
Total	373.5	82	Total	397.3	97
Sacks	26	63	Sacks	22	107

2025 Projection
8-4

2nd in Conference USA

Trophy Case



XO

National
Champions



X2

C-USA
Champions

2015
2016



7-4

Bowl
Record



O

Playoff
Appearances