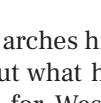


KATHRYN ZEISIG • HERALD

Lifelong WKU fan Roger Osborne, 80, watches WKU play in the NIT semifinal on March 27 with his family at his home in Bowling Green. Osborne was diagnosed with terminal cancer earlier this year and has been spending quality time with the people he loves while also supporting the team he loves. "I don't know how much longer I got, but I'm gonna be a Western fan," Osborne said.

'I don't know how much longer I've got, but I'm gonna be a Western fan.'

BY EVAN HEICHELBECH
HERALD.SPORTS@WKU.EDU



He still grits his teeth and arches his eyebrows while talking about what he calls "the saddest call ever for Western."

It takes him some time to recall exactly how it went down and who was involved, but the frustration displays clearly on Roger Osborne's face. After about two full minutes, his memory is straight: An offensive foul call was charged to WKU's Greg Smith after winning the tip on a jump ball over Michigan's Howard Porter. After holding tight to a 79-78 lead with just a few seconds left, the Hilltoppers' season was over as a result of a questionable foul call.

That game ended 52 years ago in 1966.

"You can catch it on YouTube," Osborne says now.

Osborne has spent most of his life as WKU basketball's biggest fan. Osborne, 80, has been a season ticket holder in Diddle Arena for 52 years. No one is sure of the exact number, but he hasn't missed any more than 10 home games since he and his family have been season ticket holders. Two of those games came this season, in the

Hilltoppers' final two games in Diddle Arena.

What used to be hard to believe became predictable this season more than ever: He was likely going to miss some games. Osborne was diagnosed with lung cancer in September, and the amount of time he has left has been uncertain and far from guaranteed. Six months later, Osborne is watching the Hilltoppers play in the Final Four of the National Invitational Tournament. It's the first time WKU has appeared in the same spotlight since 1954. A week and a half before the game, Osborne was given approximately three weeks to live.

"I've got an illness that's taking me down it looks like," he said from his home in Bowling Green. "The big thing that's getting me down now is, I've got cancer and I think it's something I'm still battling. I'm having more and more trouble every day."

"I don't know how much longer I've got, but I'm gonna be a Western fan."

Wearing Several Hats

Born in 1937 in Allen County, Roger attended Allen County High School where he played basketball, met his future wife and met the man who took him to his first WKU basketball game.

It's also where he first "became acquainted with Jim McDaniels' tremen-

dous height."

McDaniels, who died in September, is tied for WKU's all-time record in points scored and starred at Allen County High a little more than a decade after Osborne graduated.

Although he never got the chance to scrimmage against McDaniels in high school practice, it was in Britt's Barber shop where Osborne first realized the clean-up guy was taller than everyone else.

"As a senior they classified him as 7 foot," he said of McDaniels. "He was just a special person on top of being a great basketball player."

Allen County High also acquainted Roger with another special person: his wife Wanda. Roger says the two met through "school activity" in 1955, and their first date came when they were juniors. Nobody had a car and dancing wasn't allowed at the time. The two got married later that year.

"You didn't have too many dates back then, and you would just ride home on the bus and that was a date," he explained. "It's been many, many years now."

After graduation, Roger and Wanda, who just turned 80, moved to Louisville for two years before moving to Bowling Green to get closer to home.

Roger worked as a car salesman for the first part of his life, and speaks

gloriously of the last several decades he spent working in the sheriff's department as a bailiff, evidence custodian and chief deputy.

"I've worn about three or four hats," he says.

He and Wanda have two children, Sheila and Rick, five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

The smiles of his memories from coaching Rick and his grandchildren in summer baseball stretch wider than the smiles he has in remembrance of any basketball game.

Today, his youngest great granddaughter, 4-year-old Emmarie, gets a fist bump as she makes her way out the door before WKU tips off against Utah in the NIT.

It may take him a minute, but Roger's memory never fails to arrive where it needs to. As he makes his way to the den of the house he's lived in for 28 of his 56 years in Bowling Green, Roger details the origins of his relationship with WKU basketball.

In 1948, he remembers climbing into the backseat of Allen County High head basketball coach James Bazzell's car as he went to see his first game in person. Bazzell is the one Roger credits for "indoctrinating" him into the WKU program, saying that he got

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DOWN TO THE WIRE

Financial concerns, competition pushed Clark-Heard away

BY JEREMY CHISENHALL
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WKU women's basketball has lost one of the best coaches the program has ever seen.

Clark-Heard is headed north to take on the head coaching role at the University of Cincinnati after seemingly hitting the ceiling at WKU.

In six seasons at the helm of WKU, Michelle Clark-Heard's two Conference USA regular season championships, three C-USA Tournament championships and four NCAA Tournament appearances were rewarded with just one raise. With budget cuts coming and one of Clark-Heard's staff

positions having been cut, it was pretty clear to see that there wasn't much more room for growth at WKU.

"This is one of the hardest decisions that I have ever made in my career," Clark-Heard said in a press release following her departure from WKU. "What we have built here at WKU is special. As a team, I always talk to our players about leaving a place better than you found it. I want to thank my players, my coaching staff and my support staff for helping to make that a reality over these last six years."

Clark-Heard had a \$150,000 salary in her original contract agreement in 2012. She received a \$50,000 salary raise in 2013 after leading the Lady Toppers to a 22-11 record in her first

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Athletic success brings WKU more exposure after NIT semifinal run

BY TYLER EATON AND JEREMY CHISENHALL
HERALD.SPORTS@WKU.EDU

March Madness always brings exposure to smaller schools on a national level, as schools like University of Maryland, Baltimore County pull seemingly impossible upsets that force the sports world's eyes to a school that has an enrollment of 13,662.

According to a report from ESPN's Darren Rovell, the UMBC bookstore website sold twice as much gear in 24 hours as they had over an entire year following their win over number-one seed University of Virginia.

Another small school that made noise in the tournament was Loyola-Chicago. The 11th-seeded Ramblers advanced to the Final Four of the NCAA Tournament and have seen an increase of nearly 1,500 percent in apparel sales this past month compared to March 2017.

WKU has also had athletic accomplishments that have led to increased exposure. Looking back at one of the most memorable moments in the history of WKU athletics, an increase in apparel sales can be seen.

During and after WKU's Sweet 16 run in 2008, the WKU Store saw an increase in apparel revenue of 63 per-

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OSBORNE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1

better established as a fan when he later moved to Bowling Green.

"We're familiar with Western Kentucky University," he says. "Some of the success, some of the failures. But boy, I tell ya what, it's fun when you win."

Saving Seats for a Family Tradition

For a family who has lived and breathed WKU basketball for longer than six decades, there aren't many physical traces to represent all of the memories, teams, coaches and specific plays they've seen. No pictures, posters or Hilltopper memorabilia hang on the Osbornes' walls. In its place is an abundance of friends' and family's faces.

"It's a family tradition," Sam Osborne says as his grandfather settles into his spot on the navy blue recliner in the den. "I have vivid memories of my dad taking me, and we always went with Roger."

Sam, now 25, is part of the third generation of the Osborne's WKU fandom, and is one of the proud eight people who sits in the same row as Roger for every home game in Diddle Arena.

Roger and his family have never sat in the same place. For the 2017-2018 season, Roger called Row C of Section 103 home. He's always bought an extra season ticket, in case someone else needed a seat.

"And that way, when you get there and you find somebody that doesn't have a ticket, you can give them a ticket," he explains.

As time has passed, the routines have changed, but the tradition has remained fully intact. Wanda hasn't been able to go for a while. Climbing the stairs in Diddle Arena isn't easy anymore.

"Of course, she's still a huge fan," her husband says. "We leave her the assignment to watch everything at home and fill us in on what looked like this and that on TV."

Some of Roger's more vivid memories have come from different viewing locations. But don't think for a second he forgot any of the details.

From the top row of the bottom bleacher: "It was eye level where I was

sitting, and Clarence Glover grabbed a ball that was going out of bounds nearest to me. He threw that thing in the air and must have been 30 feet in the air and dead center."

Where was he when Ty Rogers' classic shot from near midcourt went in at the buzzer to upset No. 5 seed Drake in the 2008 NCAA Tournament? In the same green recliner as he sits today.

"We had the TV goin' in the den, TV in the kitchen. About every room in the house has a TV," Roger said, "and regardless of where you was at, you was running from TV to TV to TV. There was about 20 of us here that night. When that shot went in I tell ya I thought the roof was coming off."

As for favorites, Roger prefers to appreciate everyone. The earliest team he can remember was the 1952 team featuring Art Spoelstra, Tom Marshall and Dick White.

"I could talk about that forever," Roger says. "All the teams I can remember, I can't remember everything about any of them, but I can remember something about all of them."

But he's got the coaches down.

"Ed Diddle kind of established the program, John Oldham kind of came along and polished it, and the other coaches have been carrying it ever since," he said. "Jim Richards is one of my favorites."

Roger remains a fan of former head coach Ray Harper who, "is a mighty fine coach," by his estimate. He calls current WKU head coach Rick Stansbury "another great favorite because he's a Kentucky boy."

As much as he loves talking about "the old times," Roger says there is more to his family's fandom than just watching the games.

His son, Rick, has seen both perspectives on how one team can be fulfilling in empty times.

Rick, who turns 60 this month, has dealt with complications from a liver transplant that caused his brain to swell. He's had three brain shunts replaced in the last 15 years. Over the years, Roger has lost several friends who were faithful Hilltopper fans, but like they have been since Rick was 7 or 8 years old, the Hilltoppers are still there for father and son to enjoy together.

Standing behind him with his hands

on his father's shoulders, who is seated on the couch now, Rick describes the routine of a game day with Roger in the same way he would talk about a morning commute to work.

"We were always there, same entrance, same exit. We would get there about an hour before the game and watch everybody roll in, and then we're in no hurry to leave when it was over," Rick says as tears form in Roger's eyes. "We would listen to the postgame show on the radio. By the time we got home it was almost over, then we could discuss it, talk about it, reminisce about old times. Get that pregame going and then the postgame. Then they had that Hilltopper Hotline. I'd lay in bed and listen to it."

Wiping tears from his eyes, Roger explains that he and Rick used to cut across backyards together to go to games from their old house.

"We're probably a little farther out now, but who's in a hurry when you're going to a ball game?"

Searching for Other Cures

He's down 40 pounds, moves slowly and has a lot of difficulty hearing. Roger admits that cancer has taken a lot out of him over the past six months.

Shortly before his lung doctor gave him the diagnosis, Roger noticed that his back pain had increased dramatically and wasn't sure why breathing had become a chore.

Roger's list of current medication is longer than the short list in his memory of how he got such a disease. He was a lifelong smoker until the late 1980's when one of his lungs nearly collapsed.

It's been 30 years since he quit smoking. He's never been a heavy or regular drinker. He can't make easy bathroom stops anymore. Prostate troubles in the past seem unrelated, but the doctors have been testing different things. He said he's not sure what they can do for him. Specifics have been few, but hospice care was called in nearly three weeks ago when he was given his latest diagnosis.

In three hours spent with him watching the Hilltoppers play in the NIT, Roger felt fine. He wouldn't let me get up and grab picture frames for him or let me move closer so I could hear him better.

"He doesn't eat much," Wanda says

from the kitchen as he offers me some pizza.

Roger didn't avoid talking about cancer, saying that the doctor couldn't promise any cure but "can make it more comfortable."

"I've talked to you about this more than anyone else because, it's kind of hard to tell people what's wrong with you when you really don't know," he says. "And you don't wanna speculate over the doctor's head."

As for what keeps him going, Roger has a lot of answers beyond watching basketball.

He grew up a Baptist but attends the Cumberland Presbyterian Church across the street from his home.

"I found out I like them both," he said.

His friends range from Baptist to Catholic to Presbyterian to Jewish.

"I can go out a door of one and right into the other and I don't feel like I lose a thing," Roger said about his faith life in different churches. "Because we've only got one master in God Almighty and he serves all of them."

Wanda, of course, is a catalyst and everyday cure for Roger as well.

"She's still the most dependable person in my life," he says. "I get up feeling pretty bad a lot of mornings, even before I had this illness, and she somehow, she's smarter than me. She knows when to push it and when to let it go."

"I can't complain about our life together. It's been great. I hope it lasts many more years."

The Last Quarter

On Tuesday, March 27, the Hilltoppers find themselves in an unfamiliar place, and so does Roger.

WKU is playing in "The Mecca of Basketball," Madison Square Garden. The last time Roger's team played on this stage, he was still eight years away from making the original purchase of his season tickets.

Roger is watching from home, nearly 1,000 miles from where the players he's seen in person are actually playing.

Wanda and Rick are watching from the kitchen.

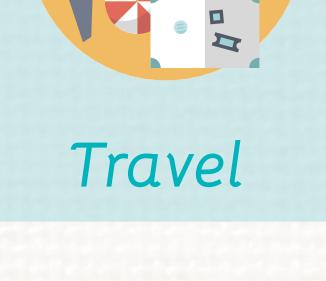
"He missed the last two home games and that was unheard of. He's lived

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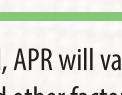
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such a good life and it is hard, you want as much time as you can get with a person," Sam said, fitting a "YES!" in between the two statements in reaction to a Justin Johnson 3-pointer.

This season has been a special one to a lot of people who follow the Hilltoppers, including Roger.

He followed the "coffee shop" talk and national drama of former WKU recruit Mitchell Robinson leaving campus in late July and returning in August, only to leave for a final time a few weeks later.

"This team was really expected to excel on a player that never made it," Roger said of Robinson. "But then we

lost him and it was like, 'Well that was for naught.' But maybe it wasn't."

"It also pointed out that this guy can coach," he finishes, pointing to the TV as the camera zooms in on Rick Stansbury, perfectly on cue.

As separate conversations flow between others in the room and his dog, Daisy, barks in the background, Roger is locked in to the game. Feet flat on the floor, both arms relaxed on the arm rests of his navy blue recliner.

The first half ends in a 32-32 tie with the Hilltoppers taking some momentum into the locker room.

"This right here is kind of the climax to about anything anybody can hope for," he said. "I hope it will last a few more years and that's fine, but this little segment we've put together here is very special to me."

As the final quarter of the game winds down, so does the conversation. With 10 minutes remaining, the score is tied again at 51.

"Two minutes," Roger says as the game cuts to commercial break with a little over two minutes remaining. "Well fellas I tell you what, you go this far, this close and it don't matter who wins," he continues, preparing himself for a possible letdown.

"I like it better if we do," he finishes with a laugh.

Junior guard Lamonte Bearden is called for an offensive foul with 20 seconds left, allowing Utah to open a four-point lead after two made free throws.

"That's it," Roger says as Utah heads back to the foul line with 5.5 seconds left.

Similar to 1966, the Hilltoppers' fi-

nal hope for the season ends with a foul call that didn't go their way. While the situations were similar, Roger won't grit his teeth and arch his eyebrows after this loss.

The loss to Utah was definitely the Hilltoppers' last game of the season. Even if the circumstances indicate that it will be Roger's last too, nothing is certain. But if it was the last time Roger Osborne watched the Hilltoppers play, he's OK with that.

"I guess all good things gotta come to an end," he says.

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DOWN TO THE WIRE

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season, but did not receive a raise after that despite doing her best work in the following five seasons.

In the middle of this past basketball season, one in which the Lady Toppers won the C-USA Tournament and made the NCAA Tournament for the second straight year and the third time in four years, men's head coach Rick Stansbury received a \$150,000 raise. That upped his salary to \$650,000 following a 15-17 season and in the midst of a 27-11 season.

That's not to say that Stansbury's raise was completely undeserved. The Hilltoppers head coach accomplished a great turnaround in the span of a

year. In the big-money world of men's college basketball, the university felt that an immediate raise was necessary to keep Stansbury at WKU. But it was clear at that point that Clark-Heard had reached the pinnacle at WKU. Her director of operations had his position eliminated due to a \$1.3 million budget cut, and with schools like UC and Ole Miss calling, it was unlikely that WKU was going to be able to prioritize keeping Clark-Heard around.

And it's not just the financial side of it that had to have had Clark-Heard looking elsewhere. Women's college basketball has an extreme gap in talent between the top tier of teams and the rest of the bunch. Everyone's up against UConn, Notre Dame and Mississippi State, playing a game of catch-up that they're doomed to lose. In that

16 appearance.

After the football team won the C-USA championship in 2015, enrollment applications saw an increase of nearly 700 people. WKU totaled 8,957 first-year freshman applicants in the 2015-16 year. WKU also won the conference championship in 2016, and WKU totaled 9,693 first-year freshman applicants in the 2016-17 academic year. The application numbers continued to rise in 2017-18, as they received 9,804 first-year freshman applications.

"How much of an effect does that have on students making their decision on where to go to college? It has a lot of impact on them, because they see Western Kentucky can be as good as anybody in the country," Stansbury said. "All they've got to do then is visit campus, and once they visit campus, they can see it for themselves."

Jace Lux, the director of recruitment and admissions at WKU, said that athletics generally generates more interest, but it's difficult for the Admissions Office to pinpoint whether or not students apply because of athletics.

"In 2015 and 2016, our office was much more innovative and aggressive in targeting prospective students in ways it hadn't been before," Lux said in an email. "It's very difficult to pin application increases down to any one single factor. Athletic success certainly doesn't hurt, and, as a general rule, athletic success contributes to short term spikes in interest in a college or university. Whether that interest translates into students who otherwise wouldn't have applied now taking the next step and submitting an application is difficult to determine."

The key to both the potential financial and enrollment benefits to athletics success is the exposure that comes with excelling on a national stage. 730,000 viewers tuned into the WKU game at Oklahoma State, per John Ourand of the Sports Business Journal. WKU's loss to University of Utah in the NIT semifinal averaged 815,000 viewers, Ourand said.

WKU also received a substantial amount of attention on social media. The final score graphic posted by the team page on Facebook had reached nearly 250,000 people as of March 24, according to data from WKU athletic media relations.

On Twitter, the final score graphic was seen by over 100,000 people, and the WKU men's basketball Twitter page itself had been seen by almost three million people in a 28-day span, up 89 percent from the previous month.

The university website also saw increased traffic. In the nine days prior to

landscape, it's a nearly impossible task for a mid-major school like WKU to pull off a first-round upset in the NCAA Tournament. That's evidenced by the fact that Clark-Heard's teams dominated C-USA, but never won a single NCAA Tournament game.

Now that she's at the helm at UC, competing with UConn in the American Athletic Conference doesn't serve to make Clark-Heard's conference battles any easier. But she now won't be forced to stake her reputation on conference championships and first-round exits. Money, at-large bids and NCAA Tournament wins will be much easier to come by for the WKU alum at her new job.

And as for what she leaves behind, the Lady Toppers have a lot of change to come. New head coach Greg Collins

will bring some continuity, being an inside hire. He joined Clark-Heard's staff when she arrived at WKU and spent the last four seasons as the team's associate head coach. He'll take control of a roster that is returning 11 players, but it will have two huge holes in it. The loss of C-USA Player of the Year Tashia Brown and C-USA Defensive Player of the Year Ivy Brown will leave the Lady Toppers with huge shoes to fill. The program will also have to deal with the loss of signee Akira Levy, who decommissioned when Clark-Heard took the UC job.

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tive effect on the university as a whole.

"We need more students knowing you can come to Western Kentucky and won't have to take a backseat to anybody," Stansbury said. "You can walk in wearing that red and be proud of it. You can be proud to be a part of Western Kentucky and be proud to be a Hilltopper."

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