

EKU coach brags to recruits about transfers lost to Power 4 schools

BY MARK STORY
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

If you want to understand the realities of coaching men's college basketball at a so-called mid-major program in the era of unlimited player mobility and big-bucks NIL, talk to Eastern Kentucky's A.W. Hamilton.

Over the past six seasons, Hamilton and EKY have lost eight high-profile players to the transfer portal, most to power-conference teams.

Wendell Green Jr., star guard of Eastern's 22-win team in 2020-21, finished his college career as a starter at Auburn. Tre King, the frontline pillar of the 2020-21 Colonels, ended his career at Iowa State.

In the 2026-27 season, there will be two former Eastern guards playing in the SEC, George Kimble III at Auburn and Jordan Crawford at Missouri. Meanwhile, ex-EKY forward Mayar Wol will be toiling in the Big East for Seton Hall.

Hamilton said when Green and King both transferred after Eastern had gone 22-7 in the coach's third season, "It was devastating and they both went on and became really good power-conference players."

In a college hoops era when everyone's entire roster is annually eligible for "free agency," Hamilton quickly recognized the reality of coaching at a school situated at Eastern Kentucky's place in the college hoops food chain.

"We've really embraced (transfers to high-major programs), and we've used that to our advantage in recruiting," Hamilton said Thursday. "We talk about all the great guards that we've had, and even the combo forwards that we've had that have moved to power five schools."

Even after some of his best players hit the portal, Hamilton was able to keep EKY hoops atop



RYAN C. HERMENS/Tribune News Service file

Eastern Kentucky head coach A.W. Hamilton now uses the success former Colonels players have had after transferring to power conference schools as a key part of his recruiting pitch.

the high wire it was walking over the three seasons prior to last year.

In 2022-23, Eastern won 23 games and reached the finals of the postseason College Basketball Invitational. The following season, EKY won the ASUN regular season title, Eastern's first regular season conference title since 1979.

En route to an 18-win season in 2024-25, the Colonels put together an eight-game conference winning streak.

Last year, however, Hamilton and EKY fell off the wire. The Colonels slipped to 11-21 in a 2025-26 season filled with adversity.

"It was the toughest year of my personal life, and it was the toughest year of my professional life," said Hamilton, who is 45. "Everything that could go wrong, went wrong. It was challenging."

Before the season even began, Hamilton was hit hard when his mother, Deni Hamilton, died Oct. 11 at age 71.

Later that same month, Eastern Kentucky learned that guard Amarr Knox, who had transferred from Alabama State and was being counted on to play a major role for EKY, was not eligible. The NCAA informed Eastern that Knox's previous university was a "school of interest in an ongoing investigation into game fixing and performance manipulation."

Knox never played a minute for Eastern Kentucky. On June 5, the NCAA announced that Knox and three of his former Alabama State teammates were permanently ineligible due to "sports betting integrity violations" that occurred in a game vs. Southern Mississippi.

"It was just a really tough year," Hamilton said. "But, when you have these type of years, you learn so much. You probably learn more in tough years like that than you

do in the years that you're super successful."

One lesson Hamilton is taking from last season is that EKY needs "to be really, really particular about who we take in the program and why we take (them)," he said. "We have to be more creative now than we've ever been (in recruiting) because I don't have \$40 million to spend on a roster."

The second point of emphasis for Hamilton is to prioritize players who can — and will — create for others.

"On the best teams that we have had here, we've had three guys (on each) who have had over 100-plus assists," Hamilton said.

In incoming transfers Justin McCarter (Northeast Oklahoma A&M Community College), Drae Vasser (Vincennes University by way of Trinity High School) and Damone King (Rhode Island via DeSales High School) and incoming freshman Amari Owens, the former Bryan Station High School star, Hamilton believes he has added four players with the realistic potential of doling out 100-plus assists each.

"I like the group we have put together," Hamilton said.

Eastern Kentucky will be playing in a new conference in 2026-27. The football-playing schools from the ASUN have merged with the remnants of the Western Athletic Conference to form the new United Athletic Conference. One member of the new league, Little Rock, employs former EKY coach Travis Ford as its head man.

Ford, who coached Eastern to the 2005 NCAA Tournament, will return to Richmond as the opposing head coach on Feb. 27.

"Anybody that leads a team to the NCAA tournament should be celebrated," Hamilton said of Ford. "So it'll be exciting to have him back. I just hope we win the game."

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