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## **“Mountaineer Basketball”**

**by  
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A sports writer I'm not but a sports fan I am... especially anything to do with WV sports. What a thrill it was to watch the WVU Mountaineer basketball team come through as it did in a year when all the “experts” predicted they would finish close to the cellar in the Big East... and “don't even think about hopes for any kind of post-season tournaments.” Of course, the predictions would be normal if one factored in the equation that the team lost 4 of last year's 5 starters and they would be primarily playing freshmen and sophomore this year. Fortunately, those making the predictions forgot the important factor of who the WVU coach was.

All year long Coach John Beilein patiently taught his young players that the thing that wins ball games is unselfish teamwork and 100%+ determination on each player's part, not for just one game but the entire season. At the slightest miscue Coach Beilein would bring the offending player off the floor, sit next to him and explain why he shouldn't have done what he did and then explained what he should have done instead. Then the coach would insert the much wiser player back into the lineup who not only played a smarter game but a harder one as well.

Many times our team was down double figures late in the game but you wouldn't have known it by the Coach's demeanor or actions. He still instructed his players methodically, switching from the fast game to the tall game as the situation demanded and by the end of the game, more often than not, the Mountaineers had emerged victorious.

By season's end the young WVU squad had not only finished higher than predicted in one of the toughest leagues in the country but were being talked about as a “bubble team” for the NCAA Tournament. Not until the last minute did WVU find that they had failed to make the cut. If the season had ended there it still would have been a super successful one.

Bypassed by the NCAA Tournament producers WVU then received a bid from the oldest national basketball tournament of them all, the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) which began separating the men from the boys back in 1938. This premier tournament was always thought of as the best in the nation featuring the top rated basketball squads, until the NCAA sought to expand the concept of a “national” tournament and brought the television and radio dollars into play. This naturally relegated the NIT to second place in most people's minds. “Why watch a tournament that only features has-beens,” many fans asked.

FYI the NIT starts out with 32 teams as opposed to the 64 teams invited to the NCAA dance but all the teams invited to the NIT have great season records with many brandishing 20+ wins. You might also want to know that NIT's board is made of exclusively of former head basketball coaches, including North Carolina legend Dean Smith, so these guys putting it together know something about basketball. Having been invited, each team based on its seeding, plays its preliminary games on the higher seeded teams home court. If they win those games and make it to the semi-finals they play that game and the championship game in New York City at the Madison Square Garden.

WV was the number one seeded team from their region and went through such teams as Delaware State- 74-60; University of Massachusetts- 90-77; NC State- 71-68; and Miss. State- 63-62 in the semi-final game. They then handily beat Clemson University in the championship game 78-73 to become the National Invitation Tournament's 2007 Champion. It was WVU's first NIT championship since winning it in 1942.

In addition to winning the NIT West Virginia Mountaineers also won the second highest number of games in the school's history, 27 and losing 9. The team that claimed the most victories was the 1959 squad led by Zeke from Cabin Creek, Jerry West, winning 29. They would have won 30 but California beat them at the buzzer to win the NCAA Championship game 71-70. So folks, let's cheer our boys from Morgantown and wish them well in the coming and subsequent years.

Which brings me to my next point... if you have a great team, which we do... then you probably have a great coach... which we do, or rather, did. When you have a great coach you must expect that other schools with mediocre coaches and a large bank account are going to come calling and, eventually, one will make your great coach an offer he, or she, can not refuse... which the University of Michigan obviously has.

Coach John Beilein, one of the best coaches this state has ever seen, has formally announced he has accepted an offer to take over the reigns of the much beleaguered Michigan Wolverine basketball program. We can all ask questions like, "Why?", but needless to say it's one or both of two reasons... the money and the challenge. Any coach would be considered not too bright if he were to not listen to a school that promised an immediate \$250,000+ increase in salary. Coach Beilein is currently making in the neighborhood of \$750,000 and is rumored to have been offered \$1 Million plus to move to Michigan. It is possible, I suppose, he took the job because Ms. Lisa Rudgers, former VP for Communications at the University of Michigan was once in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies class taught by John Beilein.

Coach Beilein, as any great coach would, is probably looking forward to the greater potential for his team to reach the final four because of the school's history of being able to snatch up quality recruits with a good coach on board. All the above aside, we must remember one thing and keep it uppermost in our minds over these next few months... college basketball is big business with only college football being even bigger. Coach Beilein, at age 54, has decided that being the coach of University of Michigan is the best business decision he could make for himself and his family.

I think we should all wish him and his family Godspeed and thank him for the five great years of his life he's given to our beautiful Mountain State, and trust the powers that be to recruit and hire another great coach that will be his equal or better.

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