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The Pride of West Virginia  
by  
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Rather than start the year off with tales of woe and the hanging of dastardly villains, I've decided to dwell on something pleasurable and uplifting. I hope the majority of you had your TV sets tuned to CBS at 1 pm on New Year's Day to watch the mighty Mountaineers take on the Ramblin' Wrecks of Georgia Tech... if you didn't you missed a great game.

The WVU football team lifted all of us into rarified air through the fall with our great expectations and their matching performances. Just when we thought we could lick the world the Cardinals from Louisville tweaked our noses, and a few weeks later the Bulls of Southern Florida did the same thing...crash and burn time, and goodbye BCS Bowl. When we heard our super quarterback, Pat White, would have to sit out the all important last game with Rutgers some were thinking..."Goodbye Gator Bowl!" However, reserve quarterback Jarrett Brown came in like a man with a mission and sent us soaring skyward again. His leadership and fantastic plays, together with Steve Slaton's running, gave us a tremendous 41-39 victory over the Scarlet Knights.

The win over Rutgers assured the Mountaineers of a January 1<sup>st</sup>, Gator Bowl appearance with the ACC's representative Georgia Tech but immediately the nay-sayers began reminding the world that WVU had appeared in 5 previous Gator Bowls only to walk away empty handed each time. We were told the "Gator Bowl Curse" would hold true once again.

As game time approached we felt good about the game since Tech's regular starting quarterback, Reggie Ball, would not be playing. However, that hope was soon shot down by the news that the Slaton half of our White/Slaton tandem was battling a thigh bruise and probably wouldn't play at full steam, if he played at all. The game began with a quick touchdown by WVU and our hopes rose again, even higher, but when the first half ended our team went into the locker room carrying the weight of an 11 point deficit. Maybe there was something to this "curse" after all, or are we just a fickle group of fans?

No problem, I thought, we get the ball first in the second half and we can cut into their lead quickly and turn this game around. Unfortunately, Tech's coach started the second half by surprising everyone with a successful, on-side kick culminating in another quick touchdown and increasing their lead to 18 points.

Slaton, WV's leading rusher and the nation's number three rusher only ran the ball three times for 11 yards and then, painfully, left the game. Georgia Tech, on the other hand, was flying high. Their NFL wannabe wide receiver Calvin Johnson ended the game with 186 brilliant reception yards and their superb running back, Tashard Choice, added 169 rushing yards to the mix. Reggie Ball's replacement, Taylor Bennett, instead of caving in under the "rookie" pressure, passed for a game high 19 of 29 passes and 326 yards including three TDs. All the ingredients for a great victory...right? Wrong! Space will not allow me to describe in detail the rest of the game but it went something like this.

An injury hobbled Patrick White would not be deterred by Tech's surprise attack that began the third quarter and proceeded to link up with his own wide receivers Gonzales and Myles for two touchdowns and rushed for 143 yards of his own, including another TD. Meanwhile, an inspired WV defensive squad awoke from their first half nap and dug in and prevented the Yellow Jackets from getting into the end zone again allowing our mighty Mountaineers to emerge victorious with a final score of 38-35...ironically, the exact score of last year's Sugar Bowl victory over another team from the Peach State. The "Gator Bowl Curse" had been broken.

An announced Gator Bowl crowd of 67,714 watched an injured WV fullback, Owen Schmitt, who normally rushes for an average of 15 or 20 yards a game, rumble for a total 109 yards and two TDs. They saw our much-media- maligned WV sophomore quarterback, Patrick White, become the only Division 1-A quarterback to rush and pass for over 1,000 yards in a season. (Pass: 1,524; Rush: 1,217)

We WV sports fans have much to be proud of, and we thank our football team for giving us such an exciting fall season. And, if our 12-1 basketball team's recent 10 point victory over previously unbeaten University of Connecticut is a harbinger of things to come, our winter months should be something to look forward to as well.

Go-o-o-o-o-o-o Mountaineers!!!!!!!!!!!!

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