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INTRODUCTION

If the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville had sailed to America in the early twentieth century to chronicle its love affair with the new sport of “Basket Ball,” he would have spent months ensconced in Indiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia. Nowhere was the game more a part of the popular culture than in these three roughly contiguous states that stretch from the beaches of Lake Michigan into the hills and hollers of Appalachia. As many of this passing generation have recalled, basketball was the perfect pastime for their modest rural lifestyles. The game was inexpensive, required just five stout men on each team, and produced more thrills than the annual town turkey shoot, once the highlight of the sporting year.

Today these basketball traditions survive in Indiana and Kentucky. But in West Virginia, the legacy has been on life support for decades. West Virginia University, the flagship team in the state, has not had a homegrown All American since Fritz Williams in 1968. In fact, “The University,” as many call it, rarely carries more than one or two in-state players, and the same holds for Marshall University, the state’s other major college.

Some attribute West Virginia’s fall from national hoops prominence to setbacks in its once-booming coal, glass, and steel industries. Since the 1950s, more than two hundred thousand people have moved elsewhere, which, factoring in changes in the state’s death and birth rates, translates to a net loss of nearly eight hundred thousand people. “Imagine two people packing up and leaving the state almost every hour of every day, and that would best describe West Virginia’s migration over the years,” noted the state’s Health Statistics Center. The unfavorable demographics led to high school consolidation, shutting down legendary basketball schools such as Normantown, Mullens, and North Fork, and ending most of the heated intra-county rivalries that fueled the sport’s popularity in scores of towns too small to field a football team. Many say that with only 1.8 million people left in the state, West Virginia will always produce an occasional pro player but will never yield the same bumper crop of NBA stars as did bygone eras that brought the likes of Hal Greer, Jerry West, Hot Rod Hundley, and Rod Thorn.

West Virginia's fall from basketball prominence also involves a more recent development that is my inspiration for this book—the satellite dish. The arrival of the satellite dish in the 1990s extended the all-powerful reach of corporate America into the twangy hills of this remote state and devastated much of what remained of this proud basketball tradition. Just as the retail giant Wal-Mart has helped put traditional Main Street America out of business, cable television has emptied the state's gymnasiums. Small-town folks, wowed by a technology that for the first time put the world at their fingertips, realized they no longer needed to assemble at the local gym to watch their beloved basketball team. Now they could throw a frozen pizza into the microwave and spend the entire evening in their favorite chair, feasting on college and professional basketball on ESPN, ESPN2, Fox Sports, or any of the other myriad cable sports packages. Like Wal-Mart, cable sports is cheap and convenient, and a friendly talking head always waits to greet you.

Why should the Walmartization of West Virginia basketball matter in the hills of San Bernardino or the corporate towers of Manhattan? Because it is not just a West Virginia phenomenon. Cable sports has thinned the bleachers to varying degrees at high schools and colleges across the country and, as current and coming generations stay home to point and click in their rapidly evolving home-entertainment cocoons, support for local teams will continue to decline, much to the detriment of small-town America.

Like Main Street shops, small-town basketball venues have traditionally served as community meeting places in winter, with the divisive issues of race, religion, and politics cast aside as entire counties unified under the shared identity of team. Personal differences may have lingered on the street, but for two hours in that cramped and often musty gymnasium everybody could agree to “root, root, root for the home team.” Sure, schools, churches, and other local organizations remain today to unite residents. But none of these places have the same cross-cutting pull a winning college or high school team does, leaving a deep void that is difficult to fill.

Cable tv has also stolen the thunder of many small-town stars. Unlike past generations' adulation for the town's star players, today's Rick Mounts, Danny Heaters, and King Kelly Colemans increasingly trot out for pregame warm-ups to tinny rap music blast over an antiquated public address system, a spattering of applause, and the demoralizing sight of a half-empty

gymnasium. Unless a local player is viewed as a rising national star, most townspeople no longer feel any compulsion to follow this year's team.

The indifference is particularly chronic today at small rural colleges. To put a competitive team on the floor, most coaches now import tattooed big-city kids who do not readily connect with the John Deere-hat crowd that still congregates at the local diner. Another problem is that many small colleges have become "commuter schools," where students from the surrounding communities drive to campus each morning, travel home in the afternoon, and work at night. None have time to attend basketball games. Sadly, those still living in the dorms often do not want to be bothered with walking across campus in the rain or snow to watch a basketball game. In addition to having 100-plus cable channels at their disposal, they now have personal computers, Sony Playstations, cell phones, and other digitized playthings to keep themselves entertained in their rooms.

And yet the teams play on, season after season, in utter obscurity. They are the last amateurs to endure five months of basketball practice as a means to earn their degrees, not to hear their names called in the NBA draft. What do these kids gain from playing two or four years at little-known colleges that their buddies back home ridicule for having no nationally televised games? What goes through their minds as they travel in cramped Dodge vans to games in one-horse towns that none of them could locate on a map just a few years earlier? What does the glory and honor of winning a championship mean when no one but the coaches and players seems to care?

The perfect place to seek an answer to these questions is the West Virginia Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. Founded in 1925 the WVIAC is home to fifteen small colleges, eleven of which have been league members for more than eighty years. Some public, some private, many are in the middle of the state and typically in small cities and towns.

Here's a 2002 roll call of the WVIAC schools: Alderson-Broaddus College, Bluefield State College, Concord University, Davis & Elkins College, Fairmont State University, Glenville State College, Ohio Valley College, Salem International University, Shepherd University, University of Charleston, West Liberty State College, West Virginia State College, West Virginia Technical University, West Virginia Wesleyan College, and Wheeling Jesuit University.

If you live outside West Virginia, chances are that none of these names rings a bell. But that should not dissuade you from reading further. What you will discover is a proud small-college conference that, like the mighty mountaineers who settled West Virginia, rarely drew national attention but rose to become legends throughout much of the state.

In this self-contained world, the wVIAC blossomed into a record-setting conference by the mid-twentieth century. Let us take a quiz. Who was the first college player ever to average 30 points or more during a season? (1) Bevo Francis, (2) Pete Maravich, (3) George King. The answer is George King. Playing in 1950 for what is now the wVIAC's University of Charleston, King averaged 30.2 points per game to lead the nation in scoring for his second straight season. Name the first team ever—high school, college, or professional—to average 100 points or more per game during a season. The answer: West Virginia Tech. In 1955 the Golden Bears averaged 107.5 points per game, prompting future Hall of Famer Bob Davies to comment a few years later that this undersized wVIAC team was five years ahead of the game. Which college coach has the highest career winning percentage of all time? (1) John Wooden, (2) Joe Retton, (3) Adolph Rupp. The answer is Joe Retton. From 1963 to 1982, Fairmont State's Retton won 83.4 percent of his games, logging a career record of 473-95. As a rival wVIAC coach once reportedly quipped, "Retton could take his team and beat you, then you could swap teams and he'd beat you with your team."

I mention these firsts to raise a larger issue. Basketball, like music, is an ongoing story of experimentation with existing rules to create new possibilities. Today, most basketball fans equate experimentation on the basketball court strictly with African Americans. Not true. Although African Americans have had a tremendous impact on the evolution of the game, experimentation and innovation do not inhere in any group or social dynamic. They apply more broadly to distinct environments where players and coaches have the freedom from intense public scrutiny to try something different. This freedom existed in impoverished West Virginia in the early and mid-twentieth century in much the same way it did later on gritty, inner-city playgrounds, and that is what makes the wVIAC and its generations of undersized kids clad in their scratchy wool warm-ups, skimpy silk shorts, and Chuck Taylor high tops such a unique historical treasure.

That's also why thousands who grew up in small-town West Virginia

from the 1920s through the 1980s fondly recall cheering with friends and neighbors each winter for their favorite WVIAC teams. Like pancake breakfasts at the fire hall, Saturday nights at the college gym were cannot-miss social events. Everyone in town, from the mayor to the Lion's Club president, was there doing his or her bit, and for days afterward the game remained all the talk in the meet-and-greet spots along Main Street.

"The basketball game was the place to go," said former Shepherd College coach Bob Starkey, describing the small town of Shepherdstown in the 1970s. "For the big games, you had to get there at least two hours ahead of time to get a seat. Those who sat at the top of the bleachers knew to open the folding windows above their heads. The open windows allowed students on a nearby hill to stand on stacked cinder blocks and watch the game for free."

But time and technology began to catch up with the league in the late 1970s. The trouble started in 1979 when Magic Johnson and Larry Bird squared off for the first time on national television in the finals of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's college basketball tournament. Eighteen million American households tuned into the show for a 24.1 percent market share, the highest in NCAA Final Four history. Then came a series of thrilling national championship games during the 1980s. By the end of the decade, the NCAA Tournament and its Final Four had arrived as a bona fide American sports tradition—and a potential growth industry that, if fully tapped, could generate billions.

In 1989 the NCAA leadership, the great arbiters of intercollegiate ethics, considered the projected television profits—and blinked. Boy, did they blink. They signed a seven-year, \$1 billion deal with CBS Sports that gave the network exclusive rights two years hence to broadcast what it would later market as "March Madness." For the event, the NCAA's annual projected television revenues soared from \$55 million in 1990 to an average of \$143 million a year for the next seven years. By the end of the decade, their pot of gold could fill Fort Knox: The NCAA signed a blockbuster ten-year, \$5.7 billion deal with CBS Sports that forevermore unleashed major college basketball from its traditional amateur moorings.

At the same time, the major colleges began to profit from the Brave New World of cable television. In 1986 the Big East Conference signed a handsome, three-year pact with the then-fledgling ESPN to showcase its All

Americans on Monday nights in what Georgetown coach John Thompson reportedly declared one of the biggest things ever to happen to the league. Other major college conference deals followed, and a nightly college basketball game on cable soon became as common in winter as reruns of *Law and Order* on TNT today.

The rise of this college-basketball entertainment empire in the 1980s crippled the WVIAC in two key ways. First, the major colleges soon overshadowed the wviac schools in their local marketplaces. As Barry Blizzard, the WVIAC's soft-spoken commissioner and lifelong supporter, described the situation, "I really think 90 percent of the drop in our attendance has been due to cable television. When I grew up in Bluefield, we got one college game a week on Saturday afternoons. It was an Atlantic Coast Conference game that was sponsored by Pilot Life. We'd watch that game, then head out and watch Bluefield State play in the evening. Well, now, if you've got decent cable, there are eight games a night. If I'm an average fan, I'm not going out to watch Bluefield State and D & E, if North Carolina State and Duke are on tv, especially if it's snowing."

The point is not that cable television represents a social evil that must be stopped. Quite the opposite. The satellite dish has been a blessing to small towns burdened with decades of geographic and cultural isolation. For the first time, folks just about anywhere can be as plugged in to mainstream news and entertainment as anyone in big-city America. The problem with cable sports in particular is it gives big-bucks, high-profile major college and, for that matter, professional basketball an invasive and unfair marketing advantage in rural America. The local teams aren't allowed equal time over the airwaves and lack the financial means to upgrade their gyms, players, and marketing strategies to fight back. As a result, small-town fans have learned to view basketball not as a town game but as an edgy, self-promotional national subculture of reversed ball caps, gold chains, and March Madness. If the local college team doesn't face a top-twenty powerhouse, throw a killer halftime show, or sell its game jerseys in the Footlocker off the interstate, it is not worth following.

The second crippling effect of the rise of the major-college entertainment juggernaut was that recruiting became far more difficult. The major colleges began to beat the bushes like never before to find their next All Americans, and outstanding players who once slipped to WVIAC schools

now entertained multiple offers from major colleges. Neither were high school players from the late 1980s onward—the first generations to be raised on March Madness, Sports Center, and Michael Jordan—as willing to play small-college basketball. If given a choice between begging for five minutes a game at a major college or playing a full forty minutes a night for four years at a WVIAC school, most kids considered it a no-brainer. They would take the major-college, or NCAA Division I, offer. It would give them a chance to play on television, brag to friends and neighbors for the rest of their lives about once facing an All American player, and, with a little luck, make a few cameo appearances in the NCAA Tournament.

This lights-camera-action mindset among young players was especially difficult for WVIAC schools to counter because none had anything even remotely flashy to tout. At some WVIAC schools, the best they could offer was clean air and great deer hunting in the fall. As some WVIAC coaches grumble, try selling that to an inner-city kid from South Philly.

Across the country, many ambitious small-college presidents got in line to join NCAA Division I and its greater profits and prestige. The WVIAC schools, however, did not budge. As mentioned, none could afford to upgrade their programs, a prerequisite for D-I membership, and many were simply nestled too deeply in the mountains of West Virginia to make the jump to another conference affordable. Instead, these proud basketball schools dribbled on and, for much of the 1980s, continued to beat the odds. But by the 1990s, the bloom was off the rose. Most schools still preferred to sign players straight out of high school, and the quality of play continued to slip as the quality of their recruits diminished. At the same time, after more than sixty years of mostly sellout crowds, WVIAC gyms emptied. Cable television had arrived and replaced the family dog as man's best friend. As many West Virginians then joked, the governor ought to consider changing the state bird to the satellite dish because one seemed to have landed in just about every yard.

"I hadn't been back to watch a game for a few years," said former Shepherd coach Bob Starkey, who retired in 1988. "When my wife and I finally attended a game, we thought something was wrong. I remember my wife whispering, 'There's no one here.' We spent the first half counting people in the stands, and I think we came up with about fifty."

And so it went from Shepherdstown in the far eastern end of the state

to Charleston and Montgomery along the Kanawha River in the west. The WVIAC had become a nostalgic twentieth-century tradition trapped in a high-tech, super-sized twenty-first-century world.

In 1993 the WVIAC left the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) after nearly sixty years in the fold. The NAIA was in financial trouble, and the WVIAC cast its lot with the more stable NCAA Division II. Although the smallest of the NCAA's three athletic domains, D-II currently oversees more than 280 public and private colleges in forty-five states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Like the big-time players in the D-I programs, D-II athletes may receive full basketball scholarships. But because the average D-II player tends to be the longest of long shots to sign a pro contract, the division embraces the non-scholarship D-III philosophy of nurturing student athletes who excel in the classroom. "We're not training professional athletes," as WVIAC commissioner Blizzard likes to say. "We're training professionals."

These WVIAC's professionals-in-training are your stereotypical low- and middle-income kids next door. That's what makes this book different from John Feinstein's *The Last Amateurs*, the only other recent attempt to capture the current state of the true student athlete. Feinstein told the story of the Patriot League, an academically elite D-I conference, where bright kids "speak in complete sentences," don't take their athletic ability—or lack thereof—too seriously, and worry more about getting into law school than getting into the NBA. For nearly all players in the WVIAC, studying for the LSAT will never make their to-do list. Although some will, no doubt, end up as six-figure cogs in corporate America, others will spend their lives as modestly paid high school basketball coaches, social workers, or small-business owners. Moreover, because of its scholarship policy and looser academic requirements, the conference assembles more low-income rural and urban kids than does the Patriot League, including a relatively large number of inner-city African American players who view their four years on campus as their only chance to earn a diploma and get ahead in life. In some cases they are the first in their families to attend college.

The coaches, although low paid and yoked to an exhausting list of responsibilities that far exceed those of any one coach at a big-budget major college, are truly committed to helping their players succeed not only on

the basketball court but in life. This point was driven home to me one day in an interview with Steve Cox, the head men's basketball coach at Concord College in tiny Athens, West Virginia. On the spot and without scrolling through old e-mails, Cox could tell me where just about all his former players live, what they do, their marital status, and even how many kids they have. Cox has been the head man at Concord for twelve years.

Such realizations make you want to let your cable bill lapse and return to the purity of the small-college game. When I mentioned spending \$120 for two upper-tier tickets to an NBA game, Cox burst out laughing. "You've got to be kidding me," he gasped, then, horrified, repeated what I had just said to his assistant coach. "Look, I'll be honest with you, I've been in basketball all of my life, and I'd never spend that much to watch a game. We could give you two sets of season tickets for that kind of money. Heck, make it three."

Tickets to most small-college games run six bucks and gets you just about any seat in the house. A slice of pizza? A dollar. Nachos? A dollar fifty. The quality of basketball? Surprisingly good, although it's a different style from that of the major-college game. Most teams have less depth than do the D-I schools and tend to rely on just a few big guns. They also rarely have seven-footers on their rosters simply because the major colleges snap up all of the talented big men in the country. Most teams make do with undersized but athletic six-foot-seven centers, which lends to a quicker, higher-scoring game. Dunks and 3-pointers there are aplenty, but don't look for any of the best of these kids in the NBA. Most are a step slow or two inches too short even to play major-college basketball. Where you might find them in a few years is in the over-forty league at the local recreation center, still playing for the love of the game.

But to properly track the day-to-day struggles and triumphs of the league, one needs a coach, a team, and a town. And that's the idea behind this book. One team, one season, one representative snapshot of small-college basketball.

In June 2002 I asked Ken Tyler, the head men's basketball coach at what is now Shepherd University, if I could tag along with his team for a season. He graciously agreed soon thereafter over a stack of blueberry pancakes at the town diner. But the wheels had flown off the project by midseason. Shepherd was limping through a losing season, and Ken, in his second year

at the college, was still very much in transition as he tried to recruit his kind of players and build a successful D-II program. In the end I decided it was unfair to write about the program's growing pains. I mention this only by way of offering my sincere thanks to Ken for his open door and keen insights along the way.

As the original idea for the book soured, I felt disappointed but far from beaten. As luck and fate would have it, I had stumbled onto one of the best, and least known, basketball stories in recent memory. It's the rags-to-riches saga of the wviac member Alderson-Broaddus College in Philippi, West Virginia. The only problem was that the team kept—improbably—winning championship after championship, forcing me to extend the book to cover not one but four seasons. That meant innumerable phone calls and road trips to Philippi, roughly a four-hour drive from my home in Shepherdstown. In the end I think the additional seasons provide a much more realistic snapshot of the year-to-year crisis management that is life in a small-college basketball program.

As luck and fate would have it, Philippi offers one of the best case studies in the wviac of the power of cable television. Isolated in the green hills of central West Virginia, Philippi spent most of the twentieth century avidly supporting Alderson-Broaddus basketball. Today that connection is gone, and in many ways, the college team has become as culturally obsolete on Main Street as a pair of Pro Keds. There are no booster clubs, no “Go-A-B” signs displayed proudly in shop windows, and few, if any, supportive bumper stickers. “The only ones who really seem to care anymore about the final score are the players and coaches,” some in the athletic department have noted.

And that's why what happened next was so remarkable.