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WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Basketball Preview



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Jay Jacobs is approaching significant milestone as part of WVU men's basketball broadcasts

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

Jay Jacobs doesn't remember the exact game, only that it was during the days when West Virginia was a member of the Big East.

Referee Tim Higgins had just made a call very few agreed with, including WVU head coach Bob Huggins and very much including Jacobs, too.

Jacobs, the longtime WVU basketball analyst, first for the Mountaineer Sports Network (MSN) and now for Learfield IMG, said he got up from his courtside chair and put his hands around his neck to signal to Higgins that he had just choked in making that call.

"Tim Higgins came over to us and I'm pretty sure he was about to throw me out of the game," said Jacobs, who is approaching nearly 50 years as a broadcaster, beginning with MSN in 1977. "That's when Huggs went over to Tim and said something to him. I'm not sure what all Huggs said, but I didn't get kicked out."

From Huggins' view: "I just went over to Tim and told him that Jay was doing that to me and not him," he said. "I told him that Jay was saying I choked. I saved him again."

It is a unique relationship Huggins shares with Jacobs, their relationship going back to Huggins' playing days at WVU in the 1970s.

"Jay was always the life of the party," Huggins said. "He likes to be the guy who makes you crack a smile."

On Huggins' weekly radio show, Jacobs plays the role of a provoker of sorts, seemingly coming up with different games each week to get the WVU coach to go off script, while in between the two take little jabs at the other.

As a broadcaster, Jacobs represented the bridge between WVU's past and present in 2010, the Mountaineers last time playing in the Final Four.

He and play-by-play man Tony Caridi called the action that night in Indianapolis against Duke, while 51 years earlier Jacobs was a member of the 1958-59 WVU team that lost to Cal in the Final Four.

"The team was playing such great basketball in 2010 and I was sky high living those moments as a broadcaster," Jacobs said. "I didn't really have any flashbacks to my time at the Final Four, because it was such a long time ago and a much different era. I really concentrated on how to bring the game to the people."

20 minutes

After earning his master's degree in secondary education from WVU in 1962, the furthest thing from Jacobs' mind was broadcasting.

Rather, he had his sights on becoming the next great basketball coach.

His teaching and coaching career began at Union High School in Benwood, a few miles south of Wheeling.

"My coaching expertise in the 1960s was with the pressing defenses that you saw back in those days that had been taught to me by (former WVU coaches) Fred Schaus and George King," Jacobs said. "It was George King that helped me get my first job in coaching."

In 1968, Union High was part of the consolidation that formed John Marshall and Jacobs was told by the county's superintendent that he was not going to be considered for the Monarchs boys' basketball coach.

"I had a friend in Martinsburg, who had just become the athletic director at Thomas Johnson High School in Frederick (Md.)," Jacobs said. "I went and interviewed and got the job."

He was still coaching there four years later when the opportunity came to move from teaching into an administrative role at the school.

"I wanted to keep coaching, but I was also interested into moving into administration," Jacobs said. "They told me I could do both, but there was a meeting with the school board and they said I couldn't do both."

"My principal called me and said I had to make a decision and I had to make it in the next 20 minutes."

Jacobs gave up coaching and went into his administrative role, explaining the role meant a significant pay raise that was too much to pass up.

"I really had success as a coach," he said. "I really thought back then that I knew it all when it came to basketball. After spending all of these years around coaches like Gale Catlett, John Beilein and Bob Huggins, I know now that my knowledge of the game really only scratched the surface. There was so much more I didn't know about the game, so maybe it was a good thing I got out of coaching."

The broadcasting gig

It was a phone call that first opened the door to Jacobs into broadcasting.

A local TV guy was putting together a team to call Friday night high school hoops games in the Cumberland-Hagerstown-Frederick area, which would be



WVU Athletics

WVU basketball commentators Tony Caridi (left) and Jay Jacobs give a smile toward the camera.

televised on Saturdays.

Jacobs became the analyst for the games, one of which just happened to be seen by Paul Miller of MSN.

"I guess Paul gave the tape to Mike Parsons and Mike Parsons was the guy who really got things rolling with MSN," Jacobs said. "I think they were looking for someone who had ties to the school and they put me in there with Jack Fleming and Woody O'Hara on the TV side."

In the days before ESPN and million-dollar TV rights with conferences, MSN was charged with producing its own radio and TV broadcasts of WVU football and men's basketball games that were then distributed around the state.

"It really was ahead of its time back then," Jacobs said. "For me, I was truly blessed to have been with such a great team with Jack and Woody and then to be with a great team with MSN, because they really knew what they wanted to accomplish and how to get there and they brought me along for the ride."

Jay and Huggs

Jacobs was part of the studio team during Catlett's weekly radio show, but was not part of Beilein's weekly show.

"Huggs called me into his office one day and said he wanted me on his show," Jacobs said. "I didn't know at first if it was going to work, because I'd been away from the weekly show for a while. Huggs goes, 'Don't worry about it. I want you on the show and here's how it's going to go.'"

During his days as Cincinnati's head coach, Huggins' weekly show on 700 AM WLW was broadcast in front of a live audience and Huggins wanted to do the same at WVU.

"My whole thing is if you're going to do that every week for two hours, you might as well try to have some fun doing it," Huggins said. "Why do something like that and just agonize over it every week?"

Jacobs has spent hours during each of those weeks sharing his side of funny stories or coming up with oddball questions for the coach to answer.

Huggins jabs at Jacobs for his lack of playing time during his college days, while Jacobs usually finds something witty to fire back at Huggins.

"I think we both like to make fun of each other," Huggins said. "I think we virtually could make fun of anything."

And during those two hours, the team of Huggins, Jacobs and Caridi even find time for a little basketball talk.

"I happen to give him what he needs," Jacobs said of Huggins. "Huggs doesn't want to do just two hours straight basketball talk."

"What I think the show does is allows Huggs to show how much of a people person he really is. He loves being there live with the people of West Virginia and it gives him a setting outside of the basketball court to show another side to him. I just don't believe he fully understood what he was going to get in me, but I've showed him."

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WEST VIRGINIA MEN 2021-22

Roster

#	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Yr.	Hometown / Previous School		
11	Bridges, Jalen	F	6-7	RFR-C	Fairmont	WV	Fairmont Sr HS
5	Carrigan, Dimon	F	6-9	RSR-C	Boston	MA	FIU
13	Cottrell, Isaiah	F	6-10	FR-C	Las Vegas	NV	Bishop Gorman HS
10	Curry, Malik	G	6-1	RSR-C	Wilmington	DE	Old Dominion
0	Johnson, Kedrian	G	6-3	S	Dallas	TX	Temple College
2	Johnson, Kobe	G	6-3	FR	Canton	OH	Canton McKinley HS
4	King, Jamel	F	6-7	FR	Uniontown	AL	Bella Vista Prep
22	McNeil, Sean	G	6-3	SR	Union	KY	Sinclair CC
23	Ndiaye, Seny	F	6-10	FR-C	Dakar	SE	Huntington Prep
32	Okonkwo, James	F	6-	FR	Maidenhead	EN	IJN Beckley Prep
3	Osabuohien, Gabe	F	6-7	SR-C	Toronto	ON	Arkansas
1	Paulicap, Pauly	F	6-8	RSR-C	Elmont	NY	DePaul
12	Sherman, Taz	G	6-4	RSR-C	Missouri City	TX	Collin College
24	Thweatt, Taj	F	6-7	FR-C	Wildwood	NJ	Wildwood Catholic HS
45	Wilson, Seth	G	6-3	FR	Lorain	OH	Lorain HS

Head Coach: Bob Huggins (West Virginia, 1977) 15th season at WVU.
Associate Head Coach: Larry Harrison (Pitt, 1978) 15th season at WVU.
Assistant Coach: Ron Everhart (Virginia Tech, 1985) 10th season at WVU.
Assistant Coach: Erik Martin (Cincinnati, 1993) 15th season at WVU.
Director of Basketball Operations: Josh Eilert (Kansas State, 2004) 15th season at WVU.
Assistant to the Head Coach: Jay Kuntz (West Virginia, 2012)
Video Coordinator: Ryan McIntyre (West Virginia, 2016)



WVU guard Taz Sherman

Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

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WVU Athletics

WVU forward Esmery Martinez

WEST VIRGINIA WOMEN 2021-22 Roster

#	Name	Pos.	Ht.	Yr.	Hometown / Previous School
23	Isis Beh	F	6-3	RS So.	Murray, Utah/Murray HS/Salt Lake City CC
5	Jasmine Carson	G	5-10	Sr.	Memphis, Tenn./Mceachern HS/Georgia Tech
33	Jeanna Cunningham	C	6-4	So.	Brentwood, N.Y./St. Francis Prep
3	KK Deans	G	5-8	Jr.	Greensboro, N.C./Connections Academy
22	Belssing Ejiofor	C	6-5	Sr.	Ebonyi, Nigeria /Paterson Eastside HS/Chipola CC
21	Ari Gray	F	6-0	Sr.	Cleveland, OH/Maple Heights HS/Xavier
00	Jayla Hemingway	G	5-11	Jr.	Collierville, Tenn./Houston HS/Mississippi State
13	Messiah Hunter	F	6-3	Fr.	Hopewell, VA/TPLS Christian Academy
12	Esmery Martinez	F	6-2	Jr.	Hato Mayor Del Ray/Dominican Replublic Hamilton Heights Christian
20	Yemiyah Morris	C	6-6	Sr.	San Bernardino, CA/Canyon Springs HS
14	Kari Niblack	F	6-1	Sr.	Leesburg, FLA./Wildwoods HS
11	JJ Quinerly	G	5-8	Sr.	Norfolk, VA./Lake Taylor HS
2	Wynter Rogers	G	5-11	Fr.	Little Rock, Ark./Little Rock Christian Academy
24	Savannah Samuel	G	6-1	So.	Woodstock, GA./St. Francis HS/Oregon State
30	Madisen Smith	G	5-5	Sr.	Greenville, S.C. Greenville Senior

Head Coach: Mike Carey (Salem, 1980) 21st season at WVU.
Associate Head Coach: Bett Shelby (Greensboro, 2005)
Assistant Coach: Craig Carey (West Virginia, 2015)
Assistant Coach: Nitra Perry (West Virginia, 2020)
Director of Basketball Operations: Meghan Bielich (Cal U, 2011)
Assistant Director of Basketball Operations: Ayana Dunning (West Virginia, 2013)
Video Coordinator: Bryce Fordyce (West Virginia, 2016)
Strength Coach: Zack Allen (Michigan, 2015)

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WVU men's team includes veterans surrounded by new faces

BY JUSTIN JACKSON
JJackson@DominionPost.com

Sitting behind the podium at Big 12 media day, WVU head coach Bob Huggins was asked how the Mountaineers would step up to help replace the departures of Derek Culver and Deuce McBride.

"I wish I knew the answer to that," Huggins said.

As the Mountaineers enter the 2021-22 season coming off a second-round NCAA tournament loss against Syracuse, the loss of Culver and McBride, who both left school early to enter the 2021 NBA Draft, will be a tough obstacle to overcome.

Huggins and his assistants hit the transfer portal and recruiting trail hard in the off-season in an attempt to fill the voids.

The Mountaineers enter the season with seven new players — four freshmen and three fifth-year transfers — who will try and carve out roles next to two returning starters, a key sixth-man off the bench and five other returners.

In all, WVU's roster will be at 15 players, although freshman forward James Okonkwo is nursing and injured left foot and is expected to redshirt.

"It's definitely a totally different team,"

WVU forward Gabe Osabuohien said. "Last year, we had a tight rotation. This year, I feel like coach Huggins has way more weapons to use and throw out there."

"All the transfers and all the new people, they all bring some different skill sets and something different to the table."

Of the three transfers, Malik Curry is a point guard with 52 college games under his belt, while forwards Pauly Paulicap and Dimon Carrigan carved out roles as rim protectors while at DePaul and Florida International.

Combined, the trio have appeared in nearly 200 college games, but Huggins said they still have to improve to be able to play in the Big 12.

"Obviously they were coached, but the way we play is a whole lot different than the way most people play," Huggins said. "The intensity and how hard we play is different. We're not going to stand in a 2-3 zone. It's going to be a learning experience for all of them. I think there's a big learning curve there."

West Virginia finished second in scoring among Big 12 teams last season, averaging 77 points per game. There is a



WVU Athletics

SEE MEN'S, I-8 WVU forward Gabe Osabuohien



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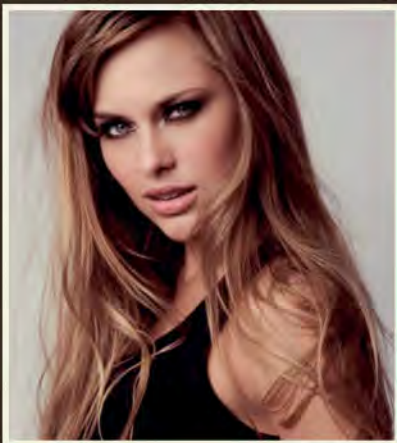
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MEN'S

FROM PAGE I-6

consensus among coaches and players that even without Culver and McBride, the Mountaineers will still be able to put points on the board.

Much of that is focused on the return of guards Sean McNeil and Taz Sherman and forward Jalen Bridges.

All three are expected to bring an outside shooting game that will force defenses to stretch out to the perimeter, which will create more open space on the inside.

"Since you can't leave me or Sean (open), that opens so much more like lobs and driving opportunities," said Sherman, who averaged 13.4 points per game last season. "You can't really leave any of us. We have a lot of capable shooters and I think we're going to show that this year."

Bridges' game is expected to take a major leap forward and he was the leading scorer with 21 points in the annual team scrimmage.

"I'm more used to everything," he said. "I've played on the biggest stages. I'm much stronger than I was and I have much better ball skills. I feel like I've rounded out the weaknesses in my game."

To that same point, Isaiah Cottrell is also expected to become another scor-

ing option.

The 6-foot-10 forward was the team's top recruit in 2020, but he tore his Achilles tendon just 10 games into last season and never got the chance to show what he can do.

"I don't think a lot of people got to see as much as I could have shown," he said. "I'm definitely excited for this year to show what I can do. All around, I'm trying to show I'm a mismatch. I can play really anywhere on the floor."

Curry can also provide points. He averaged 15.7 per game at Old Dominion last season.

Freshman point guard Kobe Johnson may wind up making an impact in his first season, too.

Johnson was the Ohio Division I Player of the Year last season while playing at Canton McKinley, where he averaged 18.1 points, 4.4 rebounds and 3.1 assists per game.

"Kobe's ball security might be the best out of all of them," Huggins said. "He's a freshman, but when you play at Canton McKinley, you play against pretty good competition. He's probably a little more prepared for what was coming than the other freshmen."

In Huggins' eyes, West Virginia's defense is the main concern. WVU allowed 72 points per game last season, which was eighth in the Big 12.



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

WVU guard Malik Curry

"We suck. We don't guard very well," Huggins said. "We're putting a lot of time in in trying to guard the ball and trying to do a better job of guarding without foul-

ing. We don't make rotations the way we need to. We still have a tendency to stand and watch."

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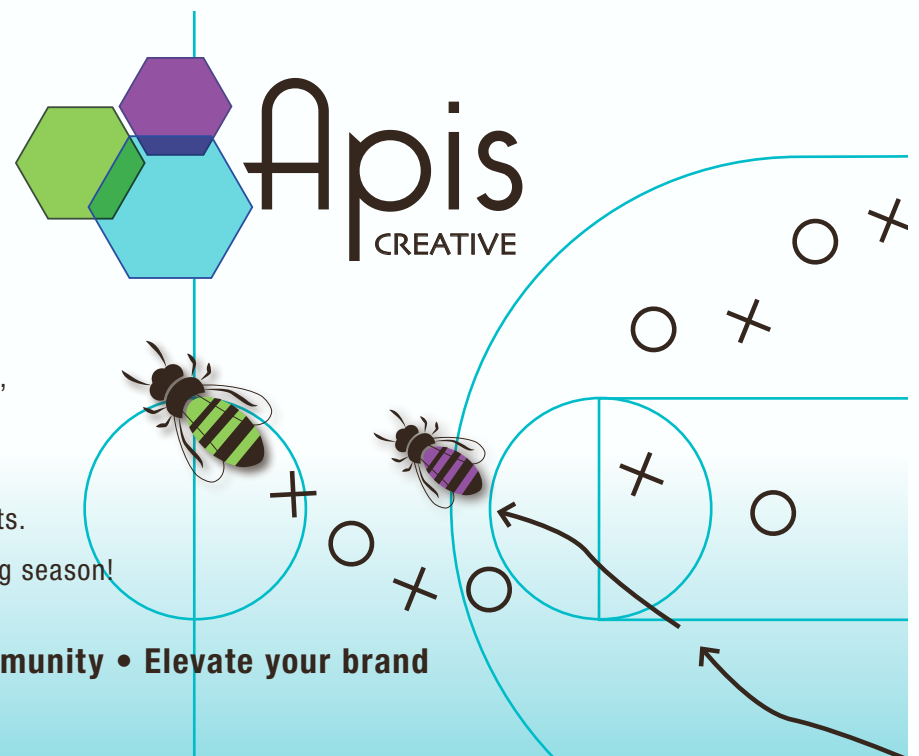
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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Bob Huggins

AGE: 68
AT WEST VIRGINIA: Owns a 310-171 record across 14 seasons with the Mountaineers and 900-382 all-time.

CONTRACT: In August, he signed an extension through 2023-24, but there are options to continually add an additional year for as long as Huggins and athletic director Shane Lyons continue to agree to an extension.
NCAA BIDS: Huggins’ teams have reached the NCAA tournament 25 times in 39 seasons (team was projected to make it in 2020 before COVID-19 cancelation).
HIGHLIGHTS: Reached Final Four in 1992 (Cincinnati) and 2010 (WVU)

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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Taz Sherman

Senior — Guard — 6'4, 190

FROM: Missouri City, Texas

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was not rated by Rivals out of high school, was not offered by any Division-I school.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Named All-Big 12 Honorable Mention in 2020-21; started six of 28 games; averaged 13.4 points and 1.8 rebounds per game; averaged 24.4 minutes per game; shot 41.3 percent from the field, 35.9 percent from 3-point range and 87.3 percent from the free throw line; posted 21 games in double figures



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Sean McNeil

Senior — Guard — 6’3, 205

FROM: Union, Ky.

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was not rated by Rivals, did not have a Division-I offer out of Cooper High.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Named All-Big 12 Honorable Mention in 2020-21; named to the Academic All-Big 12 Men’s Basketball Second Team; averaged 12.2 points per game; started 23 of 29 contests, averaging 22.2 minutes per contest; shot 39.7 percent from the field, 36.8 percent from 3-point range and 85.7 percent from the free throw line; led WVU with 69 3-point field goals; reached double figures 18 times



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Gabe Osabuohien

Senior — Forward — 6'7, 240

FROM: Toronto, Ontario

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was not rated by Rivals out of high school at Southwest

Christian Academy in Little Rock, Ark.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Named to the Big 12 All-Defensive Team in 2020-21; played in all 29 games; averaged 17.6 minutes per game; averaged 1.7 points and 4.4 rebounds per game; dished out 62 assists to go with 41 steals; led the team with 171 deflections and 23 charges taken



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Kedrian Johnson

Senior — Guard — 6'3, 185

FROM: Dallas

RECRUITING PROFILE: Not recruited out of high school; held offers from

Buffalo, New Mexico, New Mexico State, Missouri State and Texas State out of juco.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played in 26 games in 2020-21; averaged 1.3 points and 0.8 rebounds per game; averaged 7.5 minutes per contest

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Malik Curry

Senior — Guard — 6'1, 190

FROM: Wilmington, Del.

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was not rated by Rivals.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Transfer from Old Dominion; as a senior, he started 20

of 20 games for the Monarchs; led the team in scoring at 15.7 points per game, steals (37) and assists (71); named to the All-Conference USA Second Team; scored in double figures in 19 of 20 games, including a season-high 27 points at Florida International; shot 45.6 percent from the field, including 50.0 percent from 2-point range, and 85.2 percent from the free throw line

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Dimon Carrigan

Senior — Forward — 6'9, 230

FROM: Boston

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals three-star recruit.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Transfer from Florida International; started 21 of 24 games in 2020-21; averaged 6.8 points and 6.1 rebounds per game; had a team-leading 60 blocked shots, ranking second in Conference USA behind Western Kentucky's Charles Bassey (3.1 bpg) with 2.5 blocks per game; for the season, he shot 62.3 percent from the field, while averaging 19.4 minutes per game



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Pauly Paulicap

Senior — Forward — 6'8, 235

FROM: Elmont, N.Y.

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was not rated by Rivals.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Transferred from DePaul and will be a fifth year senior at WVU; attended DePaul in 2020-21 as a graduate transfer and played in all 19

games with 15 starts; had a season-high 20 points against Marquette with six rebounds and three blocked shots; posted two double-doubles on the season; totaled 24 blocked shots with at least one rejection in 15 of 19 games; in the Big East final statistics, he ranked second in offensive rebounds (2.6), sixth in blocked shots (1.3) and 17th in rebounding (6.1); completed his undergraduate career at Manhattan, where he started 71 of 71 games with the Jaspers; averaged 9.9 points and 6.4 rebounds along with 148 blocked shots

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Jalen Bridges

Sophomore — Forward — 6’7, 225

FROM: Fairmont (Fairmont Senior High)

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals four-star recruit.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Named to the Big 12 All-Freshman Team in 2020-21; named to the Academic All-Big 12 Men’s Basketball First Team; averaged 5.9 points and 3.6 rebounds per game; started 19 of 28 contests, averaging 18.1 minutes per game; shot 49.6 percent from the field and 40.9 percent from 3-point range; posted six games in double figures

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WVU Athletics

Seny N'Diaye

Sophomore — Forward — 6'10, 245

FROM: Dakar, Senegal

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was not rated by Rivals.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Named to the Academic All-Big 12 Rookie Team in 2021-21; Played in 14 games; averaged 0.1 points and 0.4 rebounds per game; averaged 2.6 minutes per contest



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Taj Thweatt

Sophomore — Forward — 6’7, 210
FROM: Wildwood, N.J.

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals three-star recruit.
AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played in nine games in 2020-21; averaged 0.4 and 0.8 rebounds per game



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Isaiah Cottrell

Redshirt-freshman — Forward — 6'10, 245

FROM: Las Vegas

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals four-star recruit.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Season ended after suffering a torn Achilles tendon against Northeastern on Dec. 29; played in 10 games; averaged 1.6 points and 1.4 rebounds per contest; averaged 5.6 minutes per game



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Seth Wilson
Freshman — Guard — 6'1, 215
FROM: Lorain, Ohio

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals three-star recruit.
PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Attended Lorain High, playing for coach John Rositano; averaged 22.2 points, 6.2 rebounds, 2.5 steals and 1.4 assists as a senior; named Lorain County Mr. Basketball

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James Okonkwo

Freshman — Forward — 6'8, 230

FROM: Maidenhead, England

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals four-star recruit.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Came to the United States in August 2020; attended Beckley Prep IJN in Beckley, West Virginia, for coach Justin Dempsey; Originally excelled as a tennis player in England and has recently began his basketball career; graduated from Furze Platt Senior School in Maidenhead, England; played in limited games at Beckley Prep IJN due to a broken finger and COVID-19

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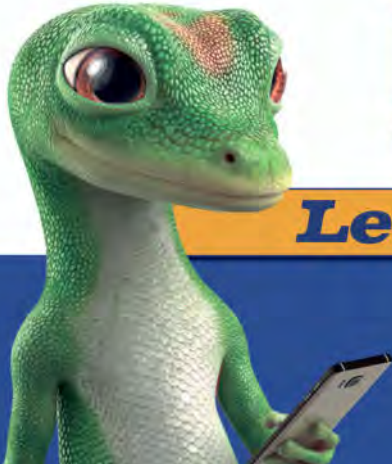
Jamel King

Freshman — Forward — 6’7, 190

FROM: Uniontown, Ala.

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals three-star recruit.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Attended Paul Bryant High in Tuscaloosa, Ala.; averaged 23.0 points and 6.0 rebounds per game in his senior season; attended Bella Vista Prep in Scottsdale, Ariz.; averaged 16.0 points per contest; shot 53 percent from 3-point range on 57 attempts, while averaging four rebounds and dishing out two assists per game



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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Kobe Johnson

Freshman — Guard — 6'3, 210

FROM: Canton, Ohio

RECRUITING PROFILE: Was a Rivals three-star recruit.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Came to West Virginia from Canton McKinley High, playing for coach Andy Vlajkovich; has a wingspan of nearly 7-feet; named the Ohio Division I Player of the Year by the Ohio Prep Sports Writers Association; averaged 20.7 points, 4.5 rebounds and 4.3 assists per game as a senior; shot 51.1 percent from the floor and 40.6 percent from 3-point range

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Forward Jalen Bridges putting pieces together

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

Sitting alongside ESPN's Fran Fraschilla at Big 12 Media Day, Taz Sherman threw out a lofty goal for teammate Jalen Bridges.

"He's been playing out of his mind," the senior WVU guard said of Bridges. "You can just tell he's put in the work and he's put in the time. He's been working on everything he needs to work on; ball-handling and he's been shooting the lights out in practice. He's going to be special. I don't think he's going to be here too long."

Translation: Bridges — in Sherman's estimation — is destined to be an NBA player one day soon.

It's actually not an unpopular opinion among WVU players. While playing last season with the Mountaineers and before transferring to UNLV, Jordan McCabe also made a similar statement.

"In terms of looking at our roster and seeing the potential some guys have," McCabe began. "Jalen is probably our best NBA prospect. I think he's really got the potential to get to that level someday."

For now, Bridges appears to be a well-kept secret, his potential known only to his teammates and coaches.

"His ball skills are a lot better," WVU head coach Bob Huggins said. "He's worked at it. He's put the time in. Obviously he can shoot it, but we'd like to see him score a little bit better off the bounce."

A glance at 2022 NBA mock drafts does not show Bridges' name listed among the expected draftable prospects, although that means very little at this point.

Still, there has been a certain level of expectations for Bridges ever since he first enrolled at WVU out of Fairmont Senior and redshirted as a true freshman.

Watching Bridges practice during that redshirt season, Huggins came out and said the 6-foot-7 forward would have likely worked his way into the Mountaineers' rotation had he not redshirted.

Former WVU forward Logan Routt, he, too, had once redshirted, said Bridges had already picked up the offense and was going to be "scary good" once he gained more strength.

After getting inserted into WVU's starting lineup midway through last season — after forward Oscar Tshiebwe left the team and transferred to Kentucky — Bridges wasted little time in taking his potential and making it a reality.

He shot 7 of 9 from the floor, made five 3-pointers and scored 19 points against Oklahoma in what was his first collegiate start.

By the end of last season, Bridges had put together six double-figure scoring games (including a career-high 22 against TCU) and was shooting 38% from 3-point range.

"Last year, I was kind of just filling a role and filling the gap we had at the [power forward] position," Bridges said. "This year, [Huggins] told me he needs me to be more aggressive and look for my own shot, and also use my shot to create for myself and my teammates."

In essence, what the WVU coaches are looking for out of Bridges is whether or not he takes that next step from the kid with potential to a player that is recognized as one of the top players in the Big 12.

And Bridges knows it.

"I put a focus on that every single day in practice and in the gym if I'm alone or there with my Dad. It's a mind set," he said. "I really never played in a system where I had to be that guy and take a lot of shots. I wasn't really comfortable doing that. Day by day I'm starting to get more assertive."

As much time as Bridges put on the court in the offseason working on improv-



WVU Athletics

WVU forward Jalen Bridges

ing his game, he may have spent just as much time in film study.

What he saw watching himself was a player who depended a lot on shooting 3-pointers.

While his 3-point percentage was solid, the majority of his shots came from the perimeter rather than driving to the basket and moving the defense.

"We had a preseason meeting and went over our shot chart with [associate head coach Larry Harrison and Athletic Data Statistician Tyler Cheng], and I noticed that I didn't really have anything in the mid-range area. It was all either at the rim or around the three-point line," Bridges said. "I looked at that as I need to be more

aggressive off the bounce and try to create for myself in the mid-range game, and maybe draw a defender and kick it off to a teammate and get them a shot."

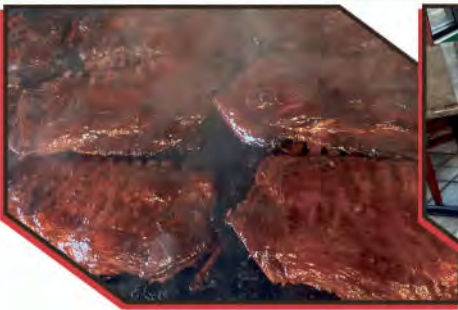
Bridges said the other major change to his game came in not letting a bad play affect the rest of the game.

"Last year when I'd miss shots, I'd get down on myself. But I have developed kind of a next-shot mentality, next play mentality," he said. "If I make a mistake, screw it, just move on. It's a 40-minute game, a long game. Sometimes it comes down to one possession but that one mistake may not be as big as you're making it to be on yourself."

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Big 12 men's preview: Beard, Texas have targets on their backs

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Chris Beard got right to it. His Texas Longhorns will have a target on their backs.

"We've already begun talking to our players about how difficult it's going to be," he said. "But it's really no different than anywhere else I've ever coached. If you're going to try to be in the fight, then you have to understand you're going to have to overcome a lot of adversity."

The Longhorns and the Oklahoma Sooners enter the Big 12 season with their future move to the Southeastern Conference leading to unease among coaches at Big 12 Media Day on Thursday. Fortunately, the event was held in a very large room at the T-Mobile Center.

"When you play at Texas, you're going to be a big game on everybody's schedule," Beard said. "With the move to the SEC at some point is there going to be some extra 'stuff'? Yes. I think there will be some adversity on the road."

Beard is in his first season with the Longhorns after taking Texas Tech to previously unattained heights. He knows the Big 12 well from his 15 years as a head coach and an assistant.

Porter Moser, who is in his first year at Oklahoma after a very successful run at Loyola Chicago, is going to experience the Big 12 for the first time. He expects the reception will be tough from fans eager to jeer the Sooners before they bolt in a few years at the latest.

"You've probably got to anticipate it," he said. "Even watching on TV, all those places are hostile anyway. If it's additionally (hostile), it is what it is. You control what you can control. You find that as a way to use that as a motivating factor at some point."

Many of the remaining Big 12 coaches chose to look at the positive side of

expansion, focusing on the new teams coming in, as opposed to the two schools leaving.

"No one cares what I think about that," Oklahoma State coach Mike Boynton said about whether the rivalry with Oklahoma will continue after the Sooners leave the conference. "Those decisions are going to be made way above me. I'll do what the people in charge of the athletic department tell me to do."

With the addition of BYU, Houston, Cincinnati and Central Florida in the coming years, the consensus is that the conference will remain one of the toughest in the country.

"We've certainly got four great programs (coming in)," TCU coach Jamie Dixon said. "I think there's no way we could have done any better."

Scott Drew, the coach of the defending national champion Baylor Bears believes that the four programs coming in will get better when they join the Big 12.

"Definitely it's four schools with tradition," he said. "Basketball-wise, BYU has great fan support, and has been very successful on the court. Coach (Kelvin) Sampson has done a great job with Houston. They were a Final Four team last year. Cincinnati (has) great tradition and history. The Central Florida program is going to get better and better."

That transition won't happen in the 2021-22 season, and that's probably a good thing for the returning schools. The Big 12 is regularly one of the highest-rated conferences in the country and this season doesn't look any different. Three Big 12 schools (Kansas, No. 3; Texas, No. 5; Baylor, No. 8) are ranked in the top 10 of the AP Top 25.

The Bears were picked to finish third in the Big 12, partly because of losing four seniors from the championship squad.

"At this time of year most coaches will



AP file photo

Texas head coach Chris Beard directs a practice at the team's facility in Austin, Texas. Beard starts his season with the Longhorns with a roster loaded with transfers who collectively bring more than 750 games and nearly 8,000 points and 3,000 rebounds in their new program.

tell you the same thing: they like their team, they like their players," Drew said. "Then they have their first scrimmage and about half the coaches say, 'We like our guys, we like our team.' The other half say, 'We've got to get better.' It's going to be a transition year for us. But the league is better than ever."

West Virginia coach Bob Huggins, one of the longest-tenured coaches in the conference, said the Big 12 will continue to thrive because of the quality of coaches.

"It's a great players league and an even better coaches league," Huggins said. "I've been in leagues where you look down there and you think you can outsmart the guy sitting down there. I've never felt that way in this league."

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WVU women's team has high expectations with 4 returning starters

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

Over the last four seasons, what Mike Carey saw when looking over at the WVU bench was pretty consistent.

Rather than seeing a host of players eager to get into the game, he instead saw mostly injured players in street clothes that could offer no help.

By the time the Mountaineers reached the NCAA tournament last season, they had played the last month of the regular season without starting point guard Madisen Smith and Carey's rotation was his starting five and two bench players.

The WVU team that fell to Georgia Tech 73-56 in the NCAA's second round a season ago has taken on many changes since, which has led to a No. 19 national ranking, the first time the Mountaineers have been preseason ranked since 2017.

Leading scorer Kysre Gondrezick is gone, having become the fourth overall pick in the 2021 WNBA Draft, but WVU does return four starters.

Behind those starters, Carey now has enough players to fill a small bus with 15 scholarship players overall on the roster.

"Not used to it yet," Carey said. "That's why it's important to figure out a good rotation. I think we can be deep, but we need everybody to be unselfish."

The four returning starters — Smith, KK Deans, Kari Niblack and Esmery Martinez — combined for 62% of the Mountaineers' scoring and rebounding from last season.

Martinez is a preseason all-Big 12 first-team selection after she averaged a double-double last season at 13.6 points and 11.6 rebounds per game.

Jayla Hemingway became a starter late last season following Smith's injury and also returns, as does seniors Jasmine Carson and Blessing Ejifor, who were key role players off the bench.

It is that core group Carey leaned on throughout the preseason to provide leadership and stability.

"We've had to show the way," Smith said. "We obviously have a lot of new players who have to come in and learn and pick up things quickly. It's up to us to help them pick up as much as they can."

Those new players are key in allowing Carey to play a full-court high-pressure defense and a faster-paced offense that he's wanted to use before but just didn't have enough players to do it.

"We have so many more options now in what we can do on offense and defense," Niblack said. "We can do a lot of things that we couldn't do last year, just because we have so many more players to work with."

Carey's 2021 recruiting class was ranked No. 24 in the country and it includes talented freshmen JJ Quinerly, Messiah Hunter and Wynter Rogers, as well as junior-college transfer Isis Beh.

"She's got a chance and she's got a quick first step," Carey said of Quinerly. "She can explode. She's got to learn. She still does a lot of reaching. She's got quick hands, but at this level, you're not going to be able to steal the ball every time down the floor."

Carey also dipped into the NCAA Transfer Portal and signed fifth-year seniors Ari Gray (Xavier), Yemiyah Morris (Mississippi State), as well as sophomore guard Savannah Samuel from Oregon State.

Of the three transfers, Morris is a 6-foot-6 center who stands above most others when on the court, while Gray and Samuel are quick-moving guards.

"She's got to learn our defense," Carey said of Morris. "At times, she stands up and gets pushed out (of the paint). She's skilled, has a good right hand and left hand. She's really going to help us."

Gray was Xavier's top player last season, averaging 13.3 points and 6.7



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

WVU forward Kari Niblack

rebounds per game, while Samuel played in 19 games and averaged 11 minutes per game as a freshman with the Beavers.

While the Mountaineers have experienced players, those players haven't had much time on the court together, which is Carey's biggest concern heading

into the season.

"We have a lot of players, so we're trying a lot of different combinations," Carey said. "The chemistry isn't there. It's going to be a work in progress."

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Blessing Ejiofor

Senior — Center — 6'5

FROM: Ebonyi, Nigeria

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Academic All-Big 12 First Team in 2020-21; played in all 29 games, including one start; averaged 2.8 points, 3.4 rebounds and 0.4 blocks per game



Jasmine Carson

Senior — Guard — 5'10

FROM: Memphis, Tenn.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played in 25 games during her first season at WVU and made one start in 2021-21; averaged 4.5 points per game and shot 38.8% from the floor, including 37.5% from behind the arc; also finished in double-figure scoring six times



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K.K. Deans

Junior — Guard — 5'8

FROM: Greensboro, N.C.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: All-Big 12 Honorable Mention in 2020-21; Academic All-Big 12 First Team; Played in and started 27 games; averaged 13.7 points per game, the second-best mark on the team, and was second on the team in assists, with 104; also led WVU in 3-point field goal percentage (41.5%) and was third on the team in steals, with 36; tallied at least one steal in 19 games, including in nine of the last 10 contests of the season



Ari Gray

Senior — Guard — 6'0

FROM: Cleveland

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Played in and started all 13 games at Xavier in 2020-21; scored in doubles figures nine times, including 15 or more points six times and 20 or more points twice; also hauled in double-digit rebounds in two games to record a pair of double-doubles; tallied multiple assists in six games and multiple steals in four games

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Jayla Hemingway

Junior — Guard — 5'11

FROM: Collierville, Tenn.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played in 23 games during her first season with the Mountaineers, including eight starts in 2020-21; started the last eight games of the season for West Virginia; earned the first start of her career at Kansas



Esmery Martinez

Junior — Forward — 6'2

FROM: Hato Mayor Del Ray, Dominican Republic

AT WEST VIRGINIA: 2021 All-Big 12 First Team; first Mountaineer sophomore to be selected to the All-Big 12 First Team since Tynice Martin in 2017; played in and started all 29 games; one of two WVU players to do so in 2020-21; finished the season with a team-high 335 rebounds, the best mark by a Mountaineer since 1986 (Georgeann Wells, 348) and the fifth-best in program history; averaged a double-double, with 13.6 points and 11.6 rebounds per game, the best mark on the team; finished in double-figure scoring 22 times, including three 20-point games

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Madisen Smith

Senior — Guard — 5'5

FROM: Greenville, S.C.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Academic All-Big 12 First Team in 2020-21; played in 21 games, including 20 starts; averaged 8.2 points, 4.0 assists and 1.1 steals per game; third on the team in assists in 2020-21, with 83



Yemiyah Morris

Senior — Center — 6'6

FROM: San Bernardino, Calif.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Averaged 3.2 points, 2.6 rebounds and 0.8 blocks per game in 2020-21 at Mississippi State; appeared in all 19 games for the Bulldogs; a solid shot blocker off the bench for MSU, she ranked second on team in blocks (15); led the team in blocks during six games



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Kari Niblack

Senior — Forward — 6'1

FROM: Leesburg, Fla.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: All-Big 12 Honorable Mention in 2020-21; preseason All-Big 12 Honorable Mention; Academic All-Big 12 First Team; played in and started all 29 games; one of two WVU players to do so; averaged 9.1 points, 5.1 rebounds and 1.6 blocks per game; led the Mountaineers in blocked shots, with 47, for the third consecutive season



JJ Quinerly

Freshman — Guard — 5'11

FROM: Norfolk, Va.

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Played for coach Sandra Sawyer at Lake Taylor High and coach Boo Williams for Boo Williams EYBL; held a national rank of No. 42 by All-Star Girls Report and No. 54 by Collegiate Girls Basketball Report; averaged 17.4 points, 6.7 rebounds, 9.0 assists and 5.0 steals per game during her career at LTHS



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Wynter Rogers

Freshman — Guard — 5'11

FROM: Little Rock, Ark.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played for her father, coach Ronald Rogers, for Little Rock Christian Academy and the Arkansas Mavericks; tated as a four-star prospect by Prospects Nation; averaged 19 points, 10.5 rebounds, 4.0 assists and 2.0 steals per game during her three-year career



Savannah Samuel

Sophomore — Guard — 6'1

FROM: Woodstock, Ga.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played in 19 games during her first season at Oregon State in 2020-21; averaged 11.5 minutes per game; also averaged 3.4 points per game and finished with 10 or more points in two contests



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WVU Athletics

Isis Beh

Redshirt-sophomore — Forward — 6'3

FROM: Murray, Utah

PRIOR TO WEST VIRGINIA: Did not compete at Salt Lake City Community College because National Junior College Association of America (NJCAA) and SLCC delayed the start for all varsity sports until January; 2020 Mountain West Conference All-Freshman Team at UNLV; averaged 3.6 points, 4.0 rebound, 0.9 assists, 0.3 blocks and 0.6 steals per game as a freshman; also shot 52.9% (46-87) from the field and averaged 20.8 minutes in 30 games played, including one start



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WVU head coach Mike Carey

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WVU Athletics

Jeanna Cunningham

Sophomore — Center — 6'4

FROM: Brentwood, N.Y.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played in nine career games during her first season with the Mountaineers in 2020-21; made her WVU debut against Fresno State on Nov. 27; hauled in one rebound; scored her first career points against James Madison on Dec. 13, with four; also knocked down a pair of free throws against the Dukes



WVU Athletics

Messiah Hunter

Freshman — Forward — 6'2

FROM: Hopewell, Va.

AT WEST VIRGINIA: Played for coach Michael Davis at TPLS Christian Academy and coach Boo Williams for Boo Williams EYBL; rated as a four-star prospect by Prospects Nation; spent her first two season of high school at Hopewell High, where she averaged 13 points per game

Martinez overcomes language barrier to find success at WVU

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

There is a technical explanation for Esmery Martinez's ability to rebound the basketball.

"She gets to the basketball," WVU head coach Mike Carey said. "She understands where the ball is coming off. I was telling our team the other day that great rebounders don't wait for the ball to hit the rim. The best rebounders do their work before the ball hits the rim and she's one of those people that does the work before it hits the rim."

Martinez, a 6-foot-2 junior forward from the Dominican Republic, was second in the Big 12 in rebounds a season ago, averaging 11.6 boards per game.

That, along with her ability to shoot from the outside and score from a variety of places on the floor — Martinez averaged 13.6 points per game last season — earned Martinez first-team all-Big 12 honors in the preseason, as well as being placed on the Katrina McClain Award watch list for the country's top collegiate power forward.

Then there is the other side of the

story to Martinez's rebounding, which is her side.

"The ball goes up, that's my ball," she said point blank.

Martinez is asked if she was ever taught any tricks of the trade while first learning the game in her home country, and she simply shakes her head.

"That's my ball," she repeats.

Martinez had three games last season in which she grabbed at least 21 rebounds and had four more in which she recorded 15. Her 11.6 rebounds per game was the most at WVU in a season since 1986.

There is more to her story that just crashing the glass.

Growing up in the Dominican Republic, Martinez first came to the United States through a sponsorship program in 2017.

She was placed at Hamilton Heights Christian Academy in Chattanooga, Tenn., but didn't understand a word of English.

"It was very difficult for me," Martinez said. "The language was very hard and I had to work just to play a position."

The game, itself, is universal, no matter which language is spoken and Mar-

tinez made an instant impact on the high school court.

She averaged 18.3 points, 14.3 rebounds and 5.9 blocks per game during her prep career that was cut short during her senior season because of a torn ACL.

By that time, Martinez had already worked her way up the recruiting rankings, reaching as high as 49 overall by ESPN in the 2019 class.

Martinez originally signed with Mississippi State, as the Bulldogs were coming off a run to the Elite Eight in 2019.

Prior to enrolling, Martinez asked for a release from her scholarship and committed to Texas, but was unable to enroll at that school, which opened up the door to West Virginia.

Carey was quick to sing Martinez's praise, seeing a freshman loaded with potential.

There were still barriers. Martinez's English was still shaky. During her freshman season, Carey said he would use hand signals during games to try and get his instructions across to the forward in games.

The WVU coach told a story last season that during a practice Martinez was sup-

posed to call out when the other team tried to set a screen, but she couldn't think of the right words.

"So she just screamed at the top of her lungs," Carey said. "It scared the crap out of everyone else."

Now in her third season of college, Martinez feels comfortable enough to conduct interviews, but is visibly nervous and worried she may say the wrong things.

The language barrier is an obstacle Martinez has overcome, and with that, her confidence as a player has grown tremendously.

"When she first got here, she was pretty unsure of herself," WVU forward Kari Niblack said. "She was in West Virginia and didn't know anybody. She couldn't speak English and couldn't understand us for the most part."

"Now she's surrounded by her best friends. That's what makes coming to practice so easy, is we're all best friends. She's comfortable playing with us and I think that's all it was. She had to become comfortable before she could get the confidence."

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Big 12 women's preview: Even with new coach, Baylor is still the class of the conference

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Baylor's sideline will look different this season, but the Lady Bears expect similar results after they were picked as the preseason No. 1 team in the Big 12.

Coach Kim Mulkey stepped down after last season to take the job at LSU. She led the Lady Bears to three national championships, 12 Big 12 titles and 19 NCAA Tournament appearances in her 21 years on the job. Baylor made the Elite Eight last season.

Big shoes to fill for the Lady Bears' new coach, Nicki Collen.

"There's certainly a lot of pressure, but I didn't take the job for there not to be pressure," said Collen, who coached the WNBA's Atlanta Dream the past three seasons. "It's going to be a new brand of basketball and it won't look the same, not going to feel the same, but we hope the results are the same."

There are plenty of reasons for optimism in Waco. The Lady Bears bring back Queen Egbo and Big 12 Preseason Player of the Year NaLyssa Smith. She averaged 18 points and nine rebounds last season.

Baylor also adds Jordan Lewis, a transfer from Alabama and the Big 12 Newcomer of the Year. She scored 17 points per game for the Crimson Tide.

Center of attention

Ayoka Lee has been one of the best players in the Big 12 since her arrival two years ago. The Kansas State junior hopes to take the next step and help her team make an NCAA Tournament this season.

Lee was a first-team All-Big 12 player in her first two seasons. She averaged 15

Preseason Player of the Year

NaLyssa Smith, Baylor

Preseason Newcomer of the Year

Jordan Lewis, Baylor

Preseason Freshman of the Year

Aaliyah Moore, Texas

Preseason All-Big 12 Team

- NaLyssa Smith, Baylor
- Ashley Joens, Iowa State
- Ayoka Lee, K-State
- Madi Williams, Oklahoma
- Lauren Heard, TCU
- Vivian Gray, Texas Tech
- Esmery Martinez, West Virginia
- Queen Egbo, Baylor
- Joanne Allen Taylor, Texas
- Lexi Donarski, Iowa State
- Holly Kersgieter, Kansas
- Taylor Robertson, Oklahoma

points as a freshman and 19 last season.

"This offseason, I've just been working on getting more comfortable outside of the paint," Lee said. "Adding that to my game in a way that feels more natural."

Both seasons have ended at the Big 12 Tournament, and Lee hopes to play well into March.

"I've been looking forward to this year for a while and just erase last year," Kansas State coach Jeff Mittie said. "I think every team will be at a different level this year because you've got more practice time and it has felt more normal."

The Wildcats last made the NCAA



AP photo

New Baylor head coach Nicki Collen will take over for Kim Mulkey, who left for LSU.

Tournament in 2019, losing to Michigan in the first round.

The next best

Texas and Iowa State tied for second in the preseason poll. The Longhorns received two first-place votes and the Cyclones got one.

Both teams are coming off disappointing finishes in the conference. Iowa was fourth in the Big 12 last season and Texas was fifth.

The Longhorns are trying to replace WNBA No. 1 draft pick Charli Collier, who led the team to the Elite Eight last season.

They'll start from the ground up with Preseason Freshman of the Year Aaliyah Moore, a forward with a versatile offensive game.

"She works her tail off," Texas coach Vic Schaefer said. "She is very coachable kid and we are really looking forward to our freshman class. Our job is to get them ready for the season."

The rest of the pack

The other teams chasing Baylor this season, in order of their places in the preseason poll, are West Virginia, Oklahoma, TCU, Oklahoma State, Kansas State, Texas Tech and Kansas.



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NOV 12	PITT	
NOV 18	ELON ¹	
NOV 19	OLE MISS <i>or</i> MARQUETTE ¹	
NOV 21	ST. BONAVENTURE, TEMPLE, BOISE STATE <i>or</i> CLEMSON ¹	
NOV 26	EASTERN KENTUCKY	
NOV 30	BELLARMINE	
DEC 4	RADFORD	
DEC 8	CONNECTICUT ²	
DEC 12	KENT STATE	
DEC 18	UAB	
DEC 22	YOUNGSTOWN STATE	
JAN 1	@ TEXAS	
JAN 3	@ TCU	
JAN 8	KANSAS STATE	
JAN 11	OKLAHOMA STATE	
JAN 15	@ KANSAS	
JAN 18	BAYLOR	
JAN 22	@ TEXAS TECH	
JAN 26	OKLAHOMA	
JAN 29	@ ARKANSAS ³	
JAN 31	@ BAYLOR	
FEB 5	TEXAS TECH	
FEB 8	IOWA STATE	
FEB 12	@ OKLAHOMA STATE	
FEB 14	@ KANSAS STATE	
FEB 19	KANSAS	
FEB 23	@ IOWA STATE	
FEB 26	TEXAS	
MAR 1	@ OKLAHOMA	
MAR 5	TCU	
MAR 9	BIG 12 CHAMPIONSHIP ⁴	

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³BIG 12/SEC CHALLENGE ⁴SPRINT CENTER, KANSAS CITY, MO

WEST VIRGINIA WOMEN'S BASKETBALL 2021-22 SCHEDULE

NOV 16	SAINT FRANCIS (PA.)	
NOV 19	KENNESAW STATE	
NOV 21	RADFORD	
NOV 25	PURDUE ¹	
NOV 27	FLORIDA STATE <i>or</i> BYU ¹	
DEC 1	KENTUCKY ²	
DEC 7	CHARLOTTE	
DEC 12	@ JAMES MADISON	
DEC 20	SOUTH FLORIDA ³	
DEC 21	MICHIGAN STATE ³	
DEC 29	MARYLAND EASTERN SHORE	
JAN 2	@ IOWA STATE	
JAN 5	@ KANSAS	
JAN 8	KANSAS STATE	
JAN 12	TEXAS TECH	
JAN 15	@ TEXAS	
JAN 19	OKLAHOMA	
JAN 22	@ OKLAHOMA STATE	
JAN 29	BAYLOR	
FEB 2	@ TCU	
FEB 5	@ OKLAHOMA	
FEB 9	KANSAS	
FEB 12	@ BAYLOR	
FEB 16	TCU	
FEB 20	TEXAS	
FEB 23	@ TEXAS TECH	
FEB 27	OKLAHOMA STATE	
MAR 2	@ KANSAS STATE	
MAR 5	IOWA STATE	
MAR 10	BIG 12 CHAMPIONSHIP ⁴	

¹ST. PETE SHOWCASE, ST. PETERSBURG, FL ²BIG EAST/SEC CHALLENGE
³WEST PALM BEACH INVITATIONAL, WEST PALM BEACH, FL ⁴MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM, KANSAS CITY, MO



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