

HILLSIDE FIELDS

A History of Sports in West Virginia

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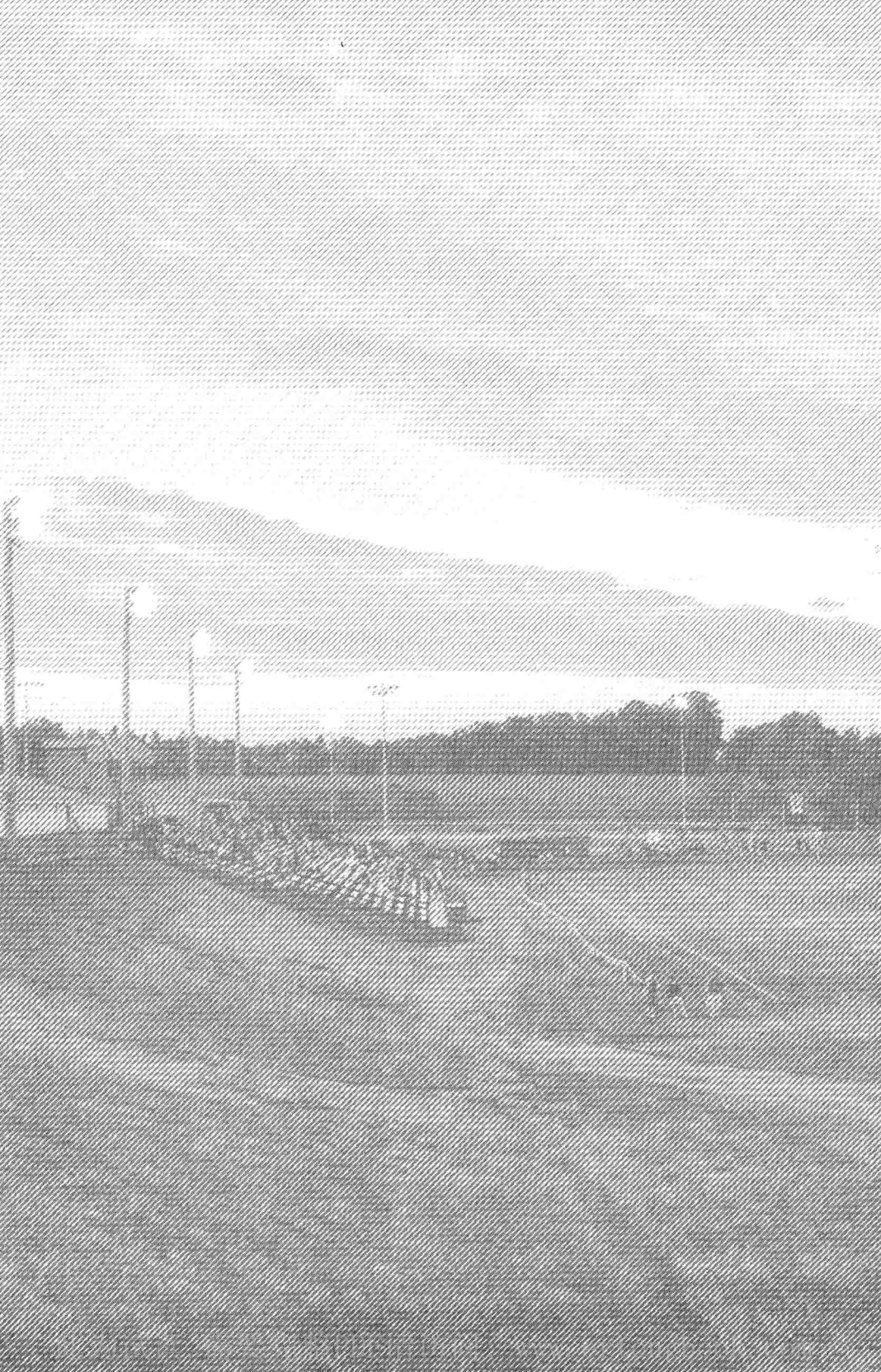
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To

Lanie, Emily, Grace, Will, Sydney, and Ella

A source of never-ending joy



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Libraries, Marshall University Archives, West Virginia State University Archives, Dale Sparks, Fred Chambers, WVU Tech Archives, Steven Cooper, *The Journal* (Martinsburg, W.Va.), Rick Haye (Marshall University photographer), Greenbrier, Ohio County Library, Marshall University Athletic Department, and Getty Images.

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Introduction

FOR A STATE with fewer than 2 million citizens, no cities of more than 60,000 people, and limited economic resources, West Virginia has established an impressive record of success in sports. Everyone knows the names of its native superstars, like Jerry West and Mary Lou Retton, and most sports fans will recognize its other All-Americans, Olympians, national championship teams, and coaches of the year. But there is much more to the story of sports in West Virginia. There are stories of local heroes like Danny Heater, who scored 135 points in a high school basketball game; of West Liberty's baseball team, which won a national college championship even though the school had no baseball diamond; of two West Virginia golfers who swept away competitors from all other states to face each other in the finals of the U.S. Amateur. There are stories of West Virginia's role in the development of modern sports—the first golf course in the country, one of the first girls' state high school basketball tournaments, the first African American to enter a game in the NBA—all are West Virginia stories.

This book is an attempt to preserve a record of the athletic triumphs and legends of West Virginia teams and athletes, and to chronicle the heart-breaking losses and titanic struggles of a small state trying to compete with larger and more prosperous states. The story of the irregular growth of sports in West Virginia's rocky mountain soil and rich river bottoms is also the story of the tribulations, hopes, values, and triumphs of a proud people.

The history of sports in West Virginia is more than an account of people playing games—sports in West Virginia reflect life in this small but complex state. Not only were sports influenced by the major events and ideas shaping the nation, but sports in West Virginia were also strongly influenced by the unique geographical, economic, demographic, and political conditions of the state. The rugged mountainous terrain, the colonial-style economy rooted in coal mining, and a weak and often corrupt political leadership have worked to shape the state and, likewise, the style of the games that West Virginians have watched and played.

This introduction is designed to provide a historical framework to assist in understanding the unique character and development of sports in West Virginia. This book can be read and understood without reference to the following historical section. The overview will be most useful for readers who are unfamiliar with the history of the state and for those who wish to gain a deeper contextual understanding of the events chronicled in this book.

* * *

In the decades following the Civil War, America was transforming from an agrarian nation into one with an industrialized economy. The Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s and early twentieth century, with its new machines, mass production, assembly lines, unskilled workers, and scientific management, changed the way work was performed. But it had an equally profound effect on American lifestyles and social thought—and on the way Americans played.

In 1863, after seceding from Virginia during the Civil War, the new state of West Virginia was on the periphery of the changes engendered by the Industrial Revolution. The state did not experience the rapid growth of manufacturing seen in many of the northeastern states, and the majority of West Virginians made their living on the family farm. However, demand for the state's resources soon began to provide new employment opportunities and economic growth. In the 1880s, industrialists discov-

ered the rich stores of oil, natural gas, and coal locked deep within the rugged mountains of the state. Drilling began, and by 1898 West Virginia had replaced Pennsylvania as the nation's leading oil producer. From 1906 to 1924 West Virginia produced more natural gas than any other state.¹ However, West Virginia's greatest natural resource was coal. Coal production grew steadily, reaching 4.9 million tons by 1887, and 89 million tons by 1917.² By 1892 a railroad system was in place that hauled coal on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in the north and, in the south, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway and Norfolk and Western Railway.³ West Virginia quickly became a railroad state, with a latticework of short line railroads and interurban trolley lines connecting cities and towns to the major railroads. With its bountiful resources, West Virginia's prosperity seemed assured.

But the failure to develop a large industrial base would have a far-ranging impact on the state. The nature of the extraction industries and the lack of large industries led to the development of small towns and villages that were isolated by the state's rugged terrain and lack of roads. Because it had no big cities and travel was difficult, West Virginia would not host many major sporting events, nor would it be home to any major league franchises. Nevertheless, sports would grow in the state. The cultural and geographic realities of the state, though, would ensure that sports' focus remained local. For example, baseball saw its beginning in West Virginia with an 1866 game in Wheeling. From this beginning, the sport soon spread as coal companies and towns along the railroad lines started teams some of which later joined regional minor leagues. As baseball and other sports developed in the state, fans supported their local teams, whether that meant a high school team, one of the many state college teams, or a town team. Sectionalism is a fact of life in a state with isolated communities and few statewide unifying symbols in sport, with the exception, perhaps, of West Virginia University.

Social beliefs were also evolving as Americans confronted changing lifestyles brought about by the Industrial Revolution, and these new ideas

would have an impact on the development of sports. Before the Civil War, most sporting activities in America had been folk games without written rules, or they had followed local rules that varied among communities. Following the war, however, rules began to be codified in the same way that industrial processes were standardized in factories. This permitted competition across geographic areas, the development of leagues, and the ability to keep and compare standardized records of performance. At the same time, attitudes about the value of sports and competition began to change. Previously, sports had been viewed as a frivolous waste of time, at best. Now, society became concerned about the corrupting influence of the cities and the loss of the physical vigor that farm work had fostered. Three popular social philosophies addressed these problems and found sport to be at least part of the cure: Muscular Christianity promoted physical activity as a means to gain moral health; Rugged Individualism encouraged facing difficult physical challenges to build character; and Social Darwinism viewed competition as essential to ensure that the best individuals would succeed. Just as they were gaining acceptance as a character-building activity throughout the nation, formalized athletics spread through the growing number of colleges and high schools in West Virginia in the first two decades of the twentieth century; in addition to the natural attraction of games, this growth was helped as educators saw the value of using sports to teach moral lessons. Sports had become an accepted activity for all males by the early twentieth century.

The 1920s have been called the Golden Age of American Sports by many sportswriters. Sports became extremely popular as postwar prosperity and a skyrocketing stock market stimulated a consumer economy. As participants or fans, Americans consumed sports as never before. In West Virginia, college football would become a major sport during the 1920s. In 1919 WVU had stepped up to the big time when it produced its first football All-American, Ira Rodgers; in the 1920s it hired nationally known football coaches and competed on the national level. Even small colleges like Davis & Elkins and West Virginia Wesleyan hoped to somehow copy the success

of Notre Dame and ride football to national recognition. In 1927, Davis & Elkins would nearly succeed. In the halcyon days of the 1920s all things seemed possible.

Beyond the world of athletics, attitudes about the proper role of women were undergoing a radical shift in the 1920s. The suffragettes had succeeded in getting the vote for women when the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1920. Now that women were recognized as having the mental capabilities required to vote, new opportunities began to unfold in many areas, including in sports. The Olympics added women's swimming and diving events, and female golf and tennis stars were featured on sports pages across the country. West Virginia started a girls' state basketball tournament in Spencer in 1919, making it one of the first three states to start such a tournament that year. But lingering doubts about the effects of competition on girls and women led to the virtual elimination of widespread interscholastic and intercollegiate competition in the state by the 1930s. The situation remained largely unchanged until Title IX was passed, in 1972.

In 1929, everything changed when the stock market crash brought about the worst financial disaster in American history. The Great Depression hit West Virginia harder than most states; in some counties, unemployment reached 80 percent. The Depression had a lasting effect on state government financing and operations. In 1932, the state government took over financing and administration of many functions previously controlled by the counties, such as schools and highways. Both became patronage-ridden and underfinanced. Schools systems were severely damaged by the lack of state funding, and those involved in education acquired what historian Charles Ambler called a "poverty complex" and a resultant inferiority complex.⁴

Basketball, on both high school and college levels, emerged as an important sport at this time for two reasons: it was inexpensive to equip teams, and state and national championship tournaments created widespread interest in the game. High school basketball flourished in the new

school gymnasiums built by New Deal projects and the West Virginia boys' state championship tournament, which had begun in 1914, built excitement. A segregated tournament for black high schools was started in 1924, and the West Virginia Catholic High School tournament began in 1936.

On the college level, three national championship tournaments began in the late 1930s: the National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball (NAIB—later the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics), in 1937; the National Invitational Tournament (NIT), in 1938; and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), in 1938. The West Virginia Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WVIAC) began holding an annual basketball tournament in 1935, predating the national tournaments and almost every other college conference tournament. WVU, Marshall, and West Virginia State all won national championships in the 1940s, creating tremendous interest in basketball among West Virginians.

On December 7, 1941, the world was changed forever when Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor. Like it did on every other aspect of American life, the war had a profound impact on sports. WVU fielded a football team during the war, but Marshall and most other West Virginia colleges did not have teams between 1943 and 1946. The state amateur golf tournaments for both men and women were discontinued between 1943 and 1947, in part because the Greenbrier was an internment camp to hold enemy diplomats and their families, and, later, was a military hospital.

Following the war, Americans basked in the good life of postwar prosperity, buying homes, televisions, and automobiles in unprecedented numbers; just as in the rest of America, in the 1950s, West Virginians felt they were in a golden age. This was certainly true for sports. The number of high school basketball teams reached an all-time high of 265 in 1955,⁵ and high schools produced athletes who would soon become college stars and All-Americans in many different sports. Marshall challenged for the Mid-American Conference basketball championship in the 1950s. The state college teams turned out small-college All-Americans annually, and schools

like Alderson-Broadus, Morris Harvey, and West Virginia Tech had players who led the nation in scoring.

The WVU football and basketball teams enjoyed unparalleled success. During the 1950s, WVU's football team dominated the Southern Conference and, for the first time, was nationally ranked in twenty-nine of the weekly polls. The WVU basketball team was consistently nationally ranked and was ranked number one for eight weeks in the 1957–1958 season. The Mountaineers played in the NCAA Tournament each year from 1955 to 1959 and, led by Jerry West, reached the national championship game in 1959.

The state of West Virginia had thrived during the first half of the twentieth century. Its mines, mills, chemical plants, and small businesses prospered, and West Virginia's economy grew at a faster pace than the national average. The state's population grew faster than the national rate, and it reached 2 million by mid-century. As the 1950s progressed, however, the state's economy was beginning to stagnate; but, blinded by a feeling of success, West Virginians failed to notice the beginnings of decline in the state's industries, roads, and schools.

* * *

By 1960, West Virginia had fallen behind in most measures of progress, and the gap widened as the decade progressed. West Virginians were shocked by the results of the 1960 Census: between 1950 and 1960 the US population had increased by 18.5 percent, with growth concentrated in large cities and suburbs. In contrast, West Virginia had lost 7.2 percent of its population. With a loss of 145,131 people, the state's population had dropped from over 2 million to 1,860,420.⁶

Jobs in mining and manufacturing had declined, leading to emigration from the state. Mechanization reduced the need for miners even when demand for coal was high. The number of miners fell from 125,000 in 1947 to 49,000 in 1960. The coal fields in the southern tier of the state were extremely hard hit with some counties losing more than 40 percent

of their population by 1970. West Virginia never again approached its 1950 mark of 2 million people even though the rest of the country continued to grow.

A second serious blow to the state's image came from national television coverage of the crucial 1960 Kennedy-Humphrey presidential primary race. Much of West Virginia was portrayed as poverty stricken and backward. The poverty in West Virginia stood in sharp contrast to much of the rest of the country, where many people lived comfortably in shiny new suburbs surrounded by the latest consumer goods. It was a cruel wakeup call for a once prosperous and growing state.

The third crushing blow to the state was the corruption of statehouse politics, which, in the 1960s, entered a dark period of nepotism, ballot-box stuffing, vote-buying, and graft. The administration of Governor Wallace "Wally" Barron, from 1961–1965, is ranked as among the most corrupt in U.S. history by some historians.⁷ It seemed that everyone voted into office was lining his pockets, while the state roads, schools, and infrastructure were a disgrace. The shrinking population, poor state image, and the inability of the corrupt government to adequately fund schools, roads, and state infrastructure contributed to the beginning of a decline in the success of West Virginias sports teams in the 1960s.

Sports in the United States changed profoundly in the second half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. The increasing popularity of professional sports and the exploding television coverage of sports have created a professional sports business model. While one objective of the model was to generate revenue by drawing large crowds to games in large stadiums, a more important goal was to develop a brand that could be marketed to generate multiple revenue streams. This model strongly influenced the direction of major college sports in that college teams began to emphasize cash flow over the educational value of sports. The glamour of big-time sports and televising sports events began to completely overshadow the sports played by small colleges, minor leagues, and in small towns. The professional sport model did not work well in West Virginia