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SPORTS

IWU's '13-14 cage team proved 2 points

By Sean Douglas

With the culmination of IWU's first championship season in the 2013-2014 campaign, two things were clear.

First, the Wildcats men's basketball program was among one of the best in small college basketball, and secondly, competing for a national championship was more than a goal for IWU - it was an expectation.

The following season, 2014-2015, was another strong campaign for the Wildcats, who won a program record 33 games. Unfortunately, their dreams to repeat were quickly dashed, as an injury to point guard Jonny Marlin and a slew of sickness led to a much earlier exit from the tournament than many anticipated.

"The year before was the best team I ever had," IWU Head Coach Greg Tonagel said. "People don't realize it, but three-quarters of the team got the flu on the way to Branson. We were on a 15-game winning streak, and we got the flu and were just not the same team when we got out to Branson."

While the Wildcats lost great players like Zac Vandewater and DJ Bettinger to graduation, the Wildcats returned to the hardwood for the 2015-2016 Wildcats full of hunger, passion, and a desire to return to the national championship.

The 2015-2016 group was a team full of talent and strong spiritual and on-court leadership, and much like the 2014 championship team, every player filled a role.

"We knew there were shoes to fill for sure, but we



Lane Mahurin attempts to get a shot off for Indiana Wesleyan University's basketball team.

liked our chances," former IWU guard and two-time national champion Bob Peters said. "After we won our freshman year, it was our reality that every year we would be a contender for the national title. Every year, that is how we prepared. There was a feeling of wanting more - a feeling of let-

down from the year before. Going into my junior year, it was a feeling of, 'This is the year where we are going to do it again.'"

While Jordan Weidner had graduated two years previously, Marlin took over that role seamlessly.

"They were just built differently," Tonagel said.

"Jordan Weidner was an elite scoring guard in [2014,] and then you go to the 2016 team, and you have Jonny Marlin, who was just an elite creator and playmaker. That was Jonny's team. He led us behind the scenes in so many incredible ways, [like] Jordan Weidner did, and they each did it according to their own personalities."

Marlin began his basketball career at IPFW, before quickly transferring to Indiana to play for Tom Crean and the Hoosiers.

"Indiana Wesleyan was

probably in the top two schools that I was looking at, so that's really where I got my first glimpse of who they are and what their program is about," Marlin said. "But I ended up going down to IU and spent two years down there."

But in his junior year, Marlin felt that he needed another change of scenery, and after prayerful consideration, he made the choice to transfer to IWU.

"Ironically, when I told [then Indiana Head Coach] Tom Crean that I was leaving, he was super supportive, and he said, 'Hey, there is a fit that I think would be really good for you,' and he actually mentioned Indiana Wesleyan. I took a visit, and I obviously fell in love with the place, the staff, and what the culture was. That was definitely what drove me to Indiana Wesleyan."

Marlin started all 38 games for the Wildcats in his senior season at the point guard position, averaging 14.5 points and 3.1 rebounds per contest. He also recorded 229 assists, while turning the ball over only 69 times.

"He was just a special player," former IWU forward and two-time national champion Lane Mahurin said. "He understands basketball in an insane way. The things he could make happen were incredible. He

was one of my favorite people to play with because I just benefitted from him. I would run and all the sudden the ball would hit me in the perfect spot for me to get some free points. It was instant offense with Jonny Marlin."

Mahurin, who had won a title with his older brother, RJ, two years earlier, was a much more complete player his junior season. He, together with Peters, would go on to be 2,000-point scorers for the Wildcats, and in his junior campaign, he was playing some of his best basketball.

"Lane Mahurin - he could really score," Marlin said. "He did it in a variety of ways - off the pick and roll, off the post-up, off an offensive rebound - so Lang was just a really, really good scorer. He was the type of guy that if nothing is going right, it still seemed that he was going to get a bucket. He kept us in every game."

Mahurin averaged 17.9 points and 5.8 rebounds per game that season, starting and playing in all 38 games for the Wildcats while shooting 55.2 percent from the field.

"Lane was a great player," Peters said. "He is one of the best players to go through Indiana Wesleyan. He could score the lights out, and you knew that was what you were going to get from him every single night."

Peters was a pretty great player in his own right for the Wildcats throughout his college career, and he, like Mahurin, played at a high level throughout his junior season. After carving a role for himself on the 2014 squad, Peters was one of the Wildcats' go-to guys in 2015-2016.

"Honestly, Bob was more like a silent assassin," Mahurin said. "With Bob, he could be having an off night, and it never got to his head. And then later in the game, he would hit two or three straight threes. Nothing ever actually bothered Bob. He was just a great teammate to have."

Peter scored a career-high 16.7 points in his junior season, scoring 634 points and shooting 49.8 percent from the field.



GREG TONAGEL

Josh Mawhor, a 6-7 lefthanded big man, was one of the team's top spiritual leaders, along with Marlin. He averaged 10.2 points per contest in his senior season.

"Josh was a big body," Mahurin said. "He could shoot

the ball, he had touch, and he was just a really fun guy to have around."

"He was just so rock solid on the court and off the court," Peters added. "He was a great guy and a great leader. We couldn't have been under two greater guys. They were solid through all of the ups and the downs that the season brought us."

Jacob Johnson, a sopho-

more at the time, was one of the Wildcats' most athletic players. Not only could he shoot, but he was also a solid defender.

"Jacob was a 6-6 wing and very, very athletic," Marlin said. "He often guarded the [opposing team's] best perimeter player. He could knock down a three, and he was really, really good off the ball. He moved. He cut. He was a straight downhill player."

And rounding out the group was Wright State transfer Grant Evans, a 6-2 guard who provided scoring pop off the bench.

"He really understood how to space the floor," Marlin said. "He was a lot of fun to play with."

It was a team full of all the right pieces - elite scorers, tough defenders, and great teammates - and those pieces together would form another championship caliber team.

"We just had so many great guys who knew what their roles were and were willing to do that for the team," Peters said.

In fact, when the team got together for their first practice, Marlin knew right away that this team was special.

"Coming from IU, I was very curious to see what the talent would be like, and honestly, I was blown away with the first open gym," Marlin said. "I found out pretty quickly that this was going to be a talented team once I got there."

"That summer we knew as a team we [could] win a national championship. Obviously, there were bumps and things like that throughout the season, but I think the belief in what we could do ever really wavered. When we looked around the gym and saw the talent we had...I think very early on we knew this team could make a deep run."