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SPORTS



Joel Okafor scanning in his options against Huntington.

The dawning of a new era

By Sean Douglas

Coming off two national titles in a span of four years, the Indiana Wesleyan University Wildcats had truly solidified themselves as one of the best small college programs not just in the state of Indiana, but in the entire United States.

But two years removed from their second championship in 2016, the Wildcats were a much different looking squad heading into the 2017-2018 campaign.

Jordan Weidner, whose incredible tournament run catapulted the Wildcats to their first title in 2014, was now a graduate assistant coach for IWU. Lane Mahurin and Bob Peters, both of whom went on to score 2,000 points in their illustrious careers, had graduated. Jacob Johnson and Ben Carlson, both sophomores during IWU's 2016 run, were now seniors.

Despite the turnover, however, a new wave of talent, complete with tremendously gifted freshmen and a notable Division 1 transfer, would help to usher in a new era of Wildcat basketball – and ultimately capture the program's third national championship in five years.

The 2017-2018 team was full of new faces. Kyle Mangas and Grant Smith were highly touted players coming out of Warsaw and Connersville, respectively. Joel Okafor was in his second year, ready to take the reins of IWU's offense as the starting point guard. Evan Maxwell, a legitimate NCAA Division 1 talent, transferred in from Kansas. And Canaan Coffey, then a sophomore, had quickly established himself as one of the team's best outside threats.

Together with the leadership and experience of Carlson and Johnson, the



2018 IWU National Championship Part 1

Wildcats, on paper, had the looks of a promising basketball team heading into preseason workouts and practices, and even earlier than that.

"The week before school started, a bunch of people would go out and play at the outdoor court at IWU," Coffey said. "One of the nights, we got guys from our team to go out there, and that was the first night where we realized how much talent and how much skills we had and how well we played together."

Before becoming the all-time leading scorer in program history and the NAIA DII National Player of the Year, Mangas came to IWU in the 2017-2018 season as a highly touted freshman from Warsaw High School.

While enjoying an outstanding high school career at Warsaw, Mangas was not heavily recruited coming out of college.

But while other colleges overlooked him, Head Coach Greg Tonagel and Associate Head Coach Jeff Clark noticed Mangas' potential right away and made it their mission to bring the supremely talented shooting guard into the fold.

"For me, it was about the culture of IWU and the relationships I knew I could build," Mangas said. "I had started talking with the coaches early in my high school career when I was a freshman. I just caught the coaches' attention, and from there, we just hit it off. I came to so many games and workouts and open gyms throughout high school. I got to know the players well. I got to know the coaches. Everything was so appealing, from the national championships to how players grow during their time there."

"I just knew it was the place for me."

Mangas is a man of few words, but even as a freshman, his play on the court did the talking for him. In his first season as a Wildcat, he did not disappoint, leading the team in scoring at 21.5 points per game, shooting 52.6 percent from the field, while ranking in all of NAIA DII in scoring with 818 total points.

"My role on the team was just to lead by example," Mangas said. "I was introverted at that time on the team. I didn't lead through my voice, but I lead by example. Guys asked me to go play my game, and that's what I did."

Maxwell, then a junior, came to IWU after rediscovering his love for the game of basketball. He began his collegiate career at Kansas University, one of the most prestigious college basketball programs in the United States.

But after a while, he realized that Kansas was not the right fit.

"I just think that I had gotten my priorities mixed up at that time," Maxwell said. "I just gave too much of myself to the game of basketball. It

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BIGJAWS Youth for Christ plan golf outing

Recently, BIGJAWS Youth for Christ announced their 2020 Golf Classic which will take place in multiple counties this coming summer.

Youth for Christ reaches young people everywhere, working together with the local church and likeminded partners to raise up lifelong followers of Jesus who lead by their godliness in lifestyle, devotion to the Word of God and prayer, passion for sharing the love of Christ and commitment to social involvement.

The BIGJAWS chapter incorporates Blackford, Grant, Jay, Adams, and Wells Counties.

The Golf Classic will kick off in Grant County on July 10 at Arbor Trace Golf

BIGJAWS
YOUTH FOR CHRIST

Course just outside of Marion off of State Route 9. The Classic will then move to the Cross Creek Golf Course in Decatur on July 17, the Brookwood Golf Course in Fort Wayne on July 24, and Limberlost Golf Club in Geneva on August 7. Blackford County's date is TBD.

Sign ups for sponsors and teams will begin next month. For more information, visit bigjawsyfc.org/ on Instagram, or visit <http://bigjawsyfc.org/>.

Gas City Speedway test planned May 24

GAS CITY – In an effort to offer race teams valuable pre-season track time, a "Test and Tune" featuring three different two-hour sessions is set for Sunday afternoon, May 24 at Gas City I-69 Speedway.

The sessions are open to all types/classes of race cars. Session one will run from noon to 2 p.m.; session two will be from 2:30–4:30 p.m., and the final session will be from 5-7 p.m.

The pit entrance gate will open at 11 a.m. for session one participants; 2 p.m. for session two participants, and 4:30 p.m. for the final session.

To comply with Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb's "Phase Three" guidelines outlined in his "Back on Track Indiana" plan, each session will be limited to 30 cars and three people per car. The cost is \$100 per car, which includes one pit pass. Additional pit passes are \$25 each with a

limit of 100 people per session. Teams may participate in more than one session, but must register and pay for each session in which they participate.

Team trailer parking shall maintain a distance of 20 feet between each trailer.

The grandstands will be closed to spectators.

Teams wishing to participate must register and pay online at www.GasCityI69Speedway.com. Any remaining pit passes will be sold on a first-come, first-served basis at the pit sign-in booth.

No concessions will be open. Sanitized restroom facilities will be available.

Those attending are recommended to wear their own personal protection equipment, including masks, and maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet. Sanitizing stations will be available in the pit area and restroom facilities.