

## 2010 Season Review • Mountaineer Baseball



**G**rowing up, every aspiring baseball player dreams of being the hero in a pressurized situation. The thrill of winning a game for your team, whether it is a walk-off single, home run or grand slam, is seen as one of the monumental achievements in America's pastime.

The 2010 Mountaineer baseball team was able to

experience such a collective thrill, yet it was magnified exponentially by the heroics of junior catcher Kevin Griffin. West Virginia entered its 55th and final regular-season game needing a victory over Villanova, and also needed help from Louisville against Notre Dame in order to clinch the BIG EAST's eighth and final spot for the postseason tournament. In a tightly contested affair against the Wildcats in Morgantown, the Mountaineer offense was stymied by some superb Villanova pitching through eight innings. Trailing 2-0 with two outs and two runners on base in the ninth inning, Griffin stepped to the plate looking to rise up in a situation that he always dreamed of being in.

An in-state native of Martinsburg, Griffin wasted no time hitting one of the biggest shots in Mountaineer baseball history. On the first pitch, the junior took a fastball offering from reliever Mike Francisco and drilled a walk-off three-run blast well over the left field wall. As the Mountaineers rejoiced like never before, they would soon find out that Louisville took care of business against postseason contender Notre Dame, putting WVU in the BIG EAST Tournament as the No. 8 seed.

Such a game-changing play was a microcosm of the 2010 WVU baseball squad – no matter what the situation was, WVU would fight, scratch and

claw until the final out. On May 1, the Mountaineers ended a three-game road trip by getting swept at Cincinnati, putting them last in the conference with a 3-15 mark.

However, coach Greg Van Zant performed one of his best coaching jobs ever by telling his team to stay the course. WVU finished 9-2 over the final 11 regular season games, including 7-2 in conference play. It started its captivat-



Kevin Griffin



Coach Greg Van Zant



Andy Altemus



Chris Enourato

ing run with a thunderous three-game sweep over the Fighting Irish, followed by a nailbiting 6-5 win over NCAA Tournament participant Bethune-Cookman. WVU was then dealt a gut-wrenching 7-5 extra-inning loss in a Friday night affair at Georgetown, but bounced back to win the final two contests.

After defeating Towson by an 8-4 score on May 18, everything came down to Villanova. There were postseason scenarios abound, but Van Zant was adamant on keeping his team focused and letting them know that they can only control their own performances, rather than banking on its outside fortunes from other teams.

WVU was dealt an initial blow in its first game against the Wildcats, falling 5-4 after rallying from four runs down with two outs in the ninth inning. The Mountaineers once again fought back to win their next contest, 9-7, before Griffin's big blast put WVU in the postseason.

Entering the 2010 season, WVU – which finished 27-30 overall and 10-17 in the conference – had plenty of questions about who was going to fill the holes left by the 2009 team's six key departures. Making matters worst, returning third baseman Dan DiBartolomeo was eventually lost for the season following a shoulder injury before WVU's third game, and promising freshman T.J. Kuban also was lost to a season-ending elbow injury early in the year.

Despite the adversity faced, the Mountaineers achieved what seemed to be the unachievable by earning a postseason spot. During their incredible up-and-down journey, the Mountaineers were paced by the veteran leadership of four quality players – junior shortstop Jedd Gyorko, redshirt junior third baseman Grant Buckner and senior relievers Andy Altemus and Chris Enourato.

Gyorko had another all-worldly campaign. The Morgantown native tied a single-season school record with 19 home runs, and led WVU in batting average (.381), RBI (57), total bases (177), slugging percentage

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(.750) base hits (90) and doubles (28). He also finished with a team-leading on-base percentage of .472, and struck out just 24 times compared to 43 walks.

For his efforts, Gyorko earned several All-America accolades, most notably becoming a Pro-Line Athletic/National Collegiate Baseball Writers Association first-team player. He was also given the Brooks Wallace Shortstop of the Year Award, named the NCBWA District II Player of the Year, and took second-team honors from Baseball America, the American Baseball Coaches Association and Collegiate Baseball Newspaper. He capped off his illustrious career as the 59th overall selection in the second round of the Major League Baseball first-year player draft by the San Diego Padres.

Buckner, an Elkview native, enjoyed a breakthrough season for the Old Gold and Blue. He batted .363 with eight home runs, 50 RBI and 17 doubles. He earned national attention for his incredible three-game series against Notre Dame on May 8-9, which included a three-home run, 10-RBI performance in game one of a 22-6 WVU win.

Buckner was rewarded with several national honors that week, being named the Pro-Line Athletic National Hitter of the Week, the Collegebaseballinsider.com National Player of the Week, the College Baseball Foundation National All-Star Lineup and the Louisville Slugger National Player of the Week Team.

Altemus and Enourato were the two backbones on a pitching staff that grew as a unit. Both veterans led the team with six wins apiece, and combined for 49 appearances in WVU's 57 games played. Altemus set the single-season school record with 29 appearances, and Enourato led the Mountaineers with 67 strikeouts.

Following the season, Altemus earned a free-agent contract with the San Francisco Giants, while Enourato signed a free-agent deal with the Toronto Blue Jays.

In many circumstances, a team that plays above its expectations has dark-horse players that come from nowhere to make an impact. Junior right fielder Dom Hayes fit that mold, batting .352 with 83 base hits, two triples and 25 RBI. Junior first baseman Justin McDavid also broke through with 53 RBI, the second-most on the team, and carried an impressive 21-game hitting streak.

Two pitchers that injected life into the starting rotation were junior right-hander Andy Berry and freshman left-hander

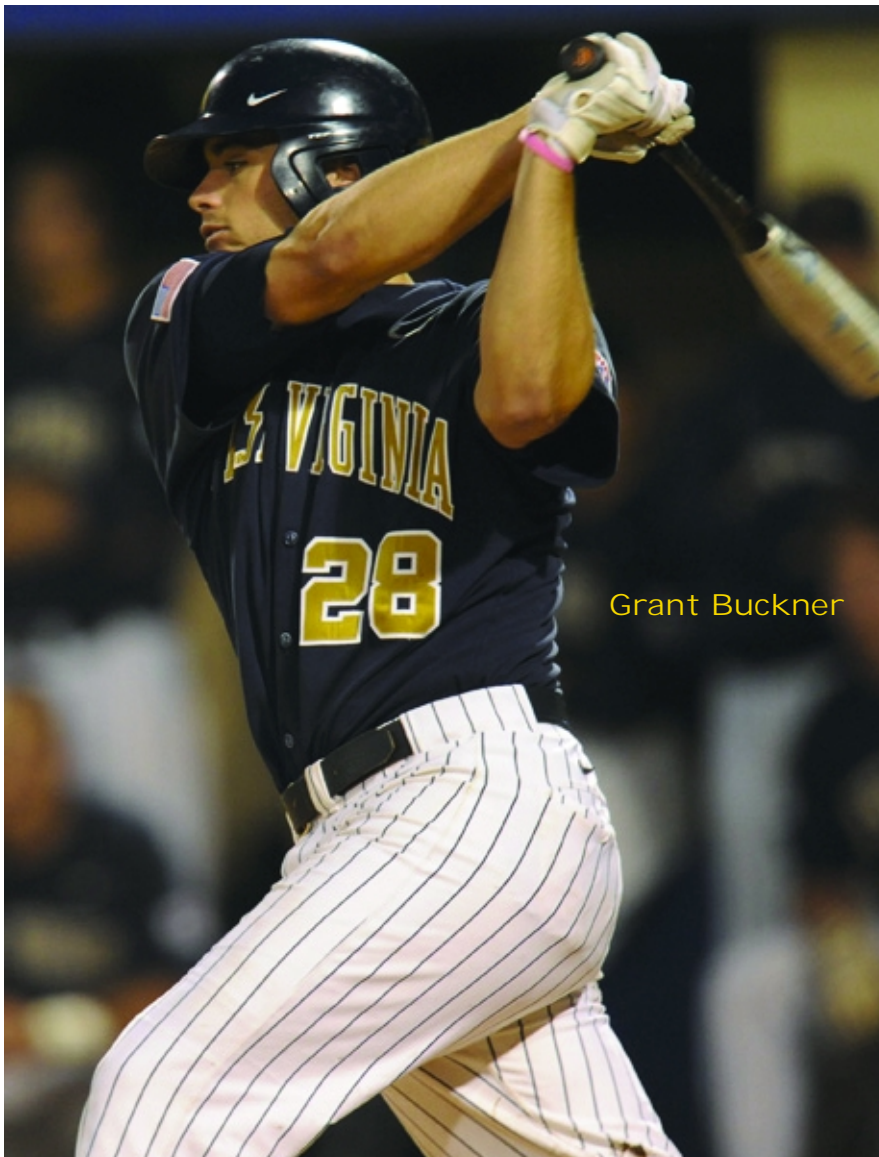


Jedd Gyorko

Michael Twigg. Berry finished 4-3 with 57 strikeouts in 70.2 innings pitched, and held ninth-ranked and top-seeded Louisville to just one run on four hits in six innings in the first round of the conference championship.

Twigg became a reliable mid-week starter, finishing 3-1 with a 5.44 ERA in 11 appearances. He held opponents to a .275 batting average, and will be a worthy candidate to start at the top of WVU's rotation in 2011.

Despite playing one of the more difficult schedules in the country, which included six post-season participants in 2010, WVU managed to finish with a .305 team batting average. The



Grant Buckner

feat marked the eighth-straight year WVU has batted above .300. The 2010 WVU baseball team also recorded the second-most doubles in school history with 135, and tied the 2003 squad for the fourth-most extra base-hits with 201.

WVU's postseason bid was its third consecutive season of reaching the BIG EAST Championship. The Mountaineers last made at least three consecutive conference tournaments from 1996-99.

During the season, WVU defeated three of its five Big Ten opponents in Iowa (9-5), Purdue (18-14) and Illinois (11-8). The Mountaineers also beat formidable foe Manhattan, erupted for a 20-9 win at long-time rival Maryland on April 7 and beat Eastern Kentucky, 13-11, at the Mountaineer Diamond Classic in front of 1,289 fans at Appalachian Power Park.

On April 11, WVU earned a quality victory at eventual BIG EAST postseason champion St. John's, winning 10-8 in 13 innings. In that contest, Enourato gave up just two runs in eight relief innings, and managed to come out after injuring his ankle while going after a foul ball. The school's all-time saves leader wanted to stay in the contest, but eventually gave way to Altemus, who earned the win.

Despite bowing out with an 0-2 mark against Louisville and USF at the BIG EAST Championship, the 2010 WVU baseball team managed to get back up and fight after each passing blow. Throughout the tough losses and damaging injuries, the Mountaineers never conceded and kept their eye on the ultimate goal of attaining a conference postseason spot.

Van Zant and his coaching staff performed as well as ever for an injury-riddled group that many thought would never taste the postseason. Now just 23 wins from becoming the second coach in WVU baseball history to reach 500 victories, Van Zant can only hope that next year's squad shows as much heart, resiliency and stick-to-itiveness that was displayed in the 2010 unit.

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