



West Virginia baseball fans — like their team — have taken Omaha by storm



West Virginia is in the College World Series for the first time in program history. Dylan Widger / Imagn Images



By **Mitch Sherman**

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OMAHA, Neb. — By the thousands, they packed into vehicles and private planes for the 1,000-mile pilgrimage. They came with pepperoni rolls and delivered Pat McAfee. And West Virginia fans brought their passion.

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It reached a peak when relief pitcher Ben McDougal coaxed the final out to clinch a 7-5 victory against Troy in the Mountaineers' first-ever game at the CWS.

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“The state doesn’t get a lot of love,” McDougal said. “But our fans are all in, all the time. If you’re a sports fan in West Virginia, you’re a Mountaineers fan. It’s as simple as that.”

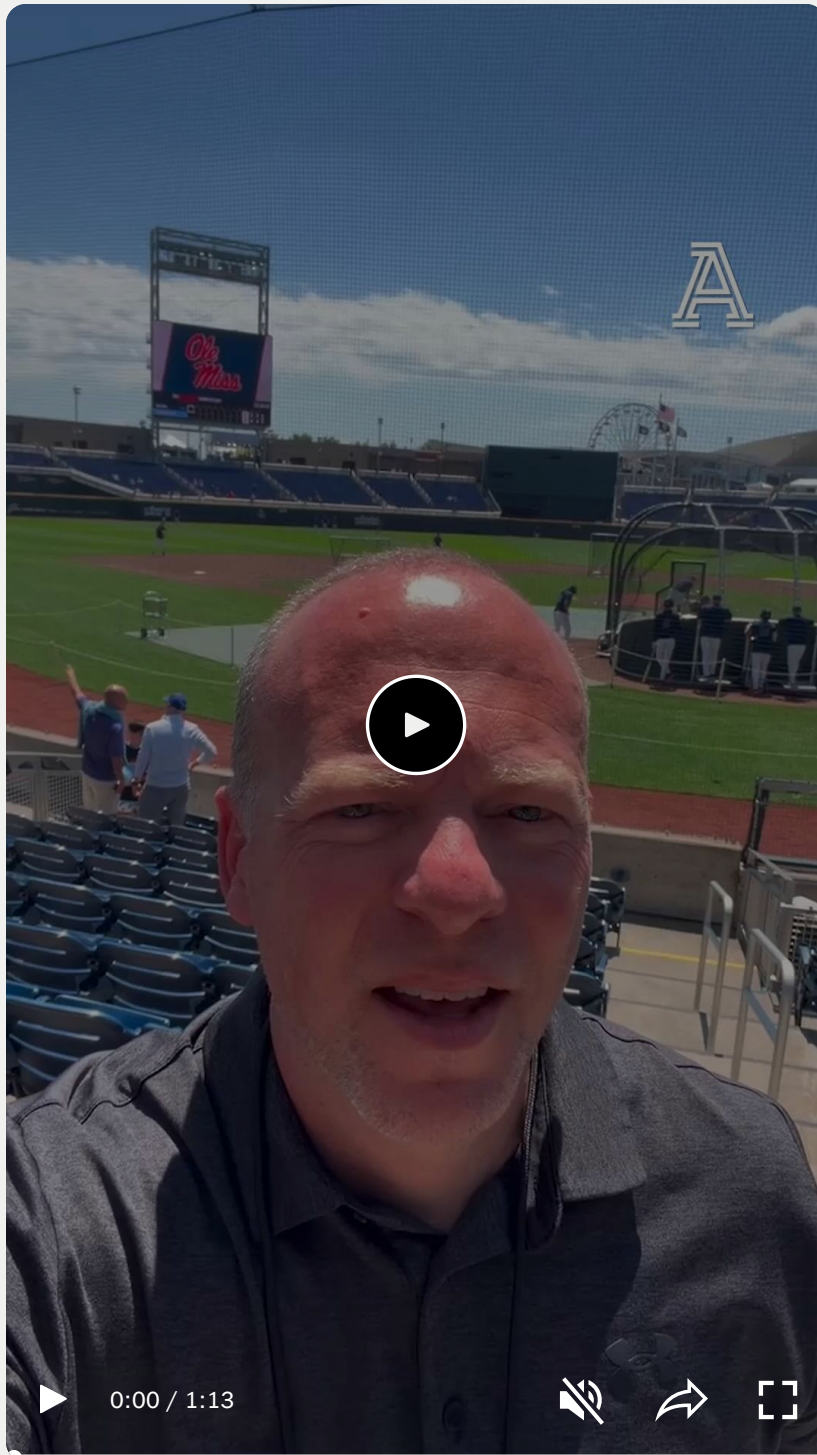
With a school-record win total and 39-year-old coach Steve Sabins pushing all the right buttons in his second season, West Virginia has broken through in college baseball. The Mountaineers (46-15) will face North Carolina on Sunday night at Charles Schwab Field.

Both teams sit one win from grabbing an inside track to the championship series.

For West Virginia, the postseason run has quenched a great thirst. The Mountaineers lost in the Super Regionals to close each of the past two seasons.

in the CWS. Undeniably, West Virginia fans fit among the most underrated nationally.

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Mitch Sherman

“They live and die on every (pitch),” West Virginia athletic director Wren Baker said. “I always tell people, we may have only 1.8 million residents, but our market share is as good as anybody. When you’re good and you’re giving them something to be proud of, they’re coming. They’re going to be stout.”

It’s happened.

McAfee, the ESPN star and former WVU kicker and punter, set up Friday adjacent to right field on the open-air second deck at Blatt Beer and Table, broadcasting his television show live from Omaha. West Virginia fans swarmed to congregate close to his set and dominated at the outset of the Jell-O shot challenge nearby at Rocco’s.

West Virginia shirts and hats are everywhere.

Larry Price, 78, came from Cincinnati with his son and grandson. It’s a bucket-list trip for them.

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The elder Price was born in Parkersburg, W.Va. His military service during the Vietnam War era denied Price an opportunity to play baseball in the Washington Senators organization.

But he funneled his love for sports into WVU. Price watched Thursday from the concourse as teams practiced ahead of the double-elimination tournament. He wore a hat stamped with something of a state motto: Coal Never Quits.

championship.

“The state just identifies. We’re kind of the underdog. People in West Virginia have a chip on their shoulder because everyone wants to talk about the Hatfields and McCoys. They want to call us hillbillies and hicks. This gives us something to rally around.”

WVU is not unusual as the lone Power 4 team in its state; 14 states have just one school in the P4. But among those states, West Virginia is the least populated, sliding in just under Nebraska.

In 2012, as West Virginia prepared for a move to the Big 12, the administration contemplated cutting baseball. Instead, Oliver Luck, then the AD, invested in it.

Randy Mazey came aboard as coach in 2013. The school moved away from Hawley Field, so rundown that Texas players recoiled at the sight of it before losing two of three games against West Virginia in 2014.

“It was not even of a high school quality,” said Tony Caridi, the longtime voice of WVU football and basketball on radio, whose son, Andrew, calls baseball games for the school.

Kendrick Family Ballpark opened in 2015. Mazey hired Steve Sabins in 2016 from Oklahoma State as an assistant coach at age 28. Sabins took over in 2024 for Mazey, who retired after West Virginia’s first appearance in a super regional. It lost in two games at North Carolina.

Last year, West Virginia went down in Supers at LSU, the eventual national champion.

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Mazey still attends practice. His son, Weston Mazey, is a freshman infielder. The former coach celebrated outside the Mountaineers' dugout Friday after the Omaha rendition of "Country Roads."

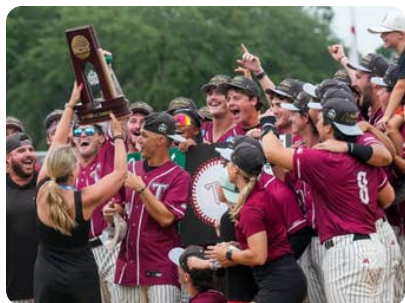
"It was an incredible moment," Baker said of the ritualistic singing.

Andrew Caridi, according to his dad, described WVU baseball as an "overnight success that took 11 years."

"People want to know that our culture means a lot to us and that this thing has been built by our people," Sabins said. "It's been built by our staff. It's been built on the belief that you can accomplish anything that you want if you have the belief.

"And that's what this place is all about. Our state is a state that's really rooted in unity and rooting for each other and believing that anything is possible."

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Guzman scored on the first straight steal of home at the CWS in 26 years.

In the eighth inning, with the Troy infield pulled in and runners at second and third with one out, Tyrus Hall, hitting in the nine-hole, bounced a two-run single over the head of first baseman Blake Cavill. Hall's clutch hit unlocked a 5-5 tie.

"To be a Mountaineer fan is to suffer," Tony Caridi said. "We've been to the pinnacle. We've been to the precipice, and it just falls off. You have these losses that are scars. There's football games you'll never forget that are like face tattoos.

"So to see this team persevere, people are pinching themselves, because this is like a Disney movie that normally doesn't happen."

McDougal, the senior lefty who earned a save against Troy, graduated from Bridgeport High School about 40 minutes southwest of Morgantown and came to WVU from Potomac State College in Keyser, W.Va. The lone batter that he faced, Troy catcher Jimmy Janicki, the Sun Belt Player of the Year who homered in his previous at-bat, fouled out to end the game with a runner at first.

"It's a blessing to be able to pour back into the state that's given us so much," McDougal said.

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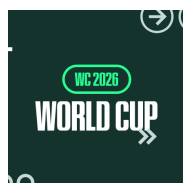
Guzman said he felt like a "superhero" after the big wins that pushed the Mountaineers to the CWS. In Omaha, the sentiment is magnified.

“You could say we’re an underdog,” said Baker, the AD.

Based on their loud arrival and fast start in Omaha, the Mountaineers look like a favorite.

Mitch Sherman is a staff writer for The Athletic covering Nebraska football. He previously covered college sports for ESPN.com after working 13 years for the Omaha World-Herald. Mitch is an Omaha native and lifelong Nebraskan.

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