

# What Could Have Been

By Nicholas Robinson

**ROKAS GRABLIAUSKAS**

*“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

In a tired yet apt analogy, a sports season is often compared to the Pauline metaphor of pursuing a Godly life: perseverance, hard work, determination and keeping focus on the ultimate goal. In the case of the 2019-20 Golden Eagles men’s basketball squad – that goal was a national title.

And the team was on the cusp of a deep run in Kansas City, just one year removed from its first big dance experience since 2013. Last season, JBU fell to Bethel University (Tenn.) in the Round of 32, but the taste of bigger aspirations fueled a 28-5 record heading toward another trip to the Paris of the Plains. That is, until Rudy Gobert of the NBA’s Utah Jazz tested positive for COVID-19, sending the world of sports into a tailspin.

The dominos then began to fall. The NBA halted its season on March 11, just before tipoff between the Jazz and the Oklahoma City Thunder. Like the virus, the shutdowns spread quickly. The NCAA’s prized March Madness was thrown into doubt, and before anyone could blink, the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Division II basketball tournament in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, already underway, began day two of the Round of 32 with only immediate family in the stands. The compromises and mitigation efforts didn’t even last three games.

Midway through the day, the rest of the tournament was canceled. Soon after, the Golden Eagles received word from the NAIA national office that its season, which held tremendous promise, was over as well. It was just one of many affected by the global pandemic.

Sixth-year head coach Jason Beschta admitted that heavy emotions were shared by the team.

“Heartbroken. Disappointed. Angry. Confused. Unfinished. Lost,” he said. “So many feelings, so many thoughts, so many questions to try and process and navigate.”

## Rounding the Final Turn

While JBU wasn’t able to capture its second Sooner Athletic Conference tournament title, falling to Southwestern Assemblies of God University in the championship game, the Golden Eagles were ready to travel to Kansas City. Huge road victories at Oklahoma City University and Southwestern Assemblies of God, both slugfests that finished in overtime, added a little distance to the race but provided the squad worthwhile hurdles that were successfully cleared.

A team that doesn’t face adversity can’t be expected to succeed in Kansas City. However, a team that time and time again rises to meet challenges, like JBU in 2019-20, boasted a resume rife with championship-caliber bona fides.

“Our guys had so much confidence and excitement heading into the national tournament,” Beschta said, explaining the team’s response to a grueling SAC schedule and tournament finish. “We were consistently playing some of our best basketball of the season, which was shown by our run to the SAC tournament finals. Together, we had such a strong belief that we were going to make a run in Kansas City.”

The Golden Eagles were easily one of the country’s most balanced teams. The lineup, featuring four of its five starters averaging double-digit scoring efforts each night, was led by NAIA All-America third team selection sophomore Luke Harper, juniors Densier Carnes and Rokas Grabliauskas, and senior Quintin Bailey. These assets provided enough firepower on any given night to outscore the opposition. That’s not to say that defense wasn’t a mainstay as



well – sophomore Ira Perrier, regarded a top defender in the SAC, helped lead the squad to a mere 66.5 points per game allowed – easily the best in the conference. Add into the mix a one-man hype machine in transfer senior Kiree Hutchings, a crowd favorite known for his timely triples and exuberant celebrations, JBU seemed to have all the pieces needed to vie for another red banner to hang from the Bill George Arena rafters.

## Calling Off the Race

Less than a day before sporting competition nationwide evaporated, the Golden Eagles gathered in the Bynum Theater to watch the NAIA's selection show, virtually guaranteed a high-level seeding in the tournament after finishing second, both in the SAC regular season and tournament – not to mention JBU's 81-74 win over second-ranked Mid-America Christian University at the end of January.



**KIREE HUTCHINGS**

Such strong finishes in the SAC historically lead not only to a national tournament berth, if an automatic entry isn't clinched, but usually a strong seeding as well. This is often based on the conference's year-over-year showings in Kansas City and highlighted by 12 men's basketball national titles.

With the sporting world quickly shuttering, and the rest of the country soon to follow, Beschta and the student-athletes figured it was only a matter of time.

"After the excitement of the selection show the night before, to watch it all unfold and unravel so quickly that day was surreal. Most of the guys were aware that things were changing as they followed the news on social media as [NCAA Division I] conferences began canceling their tournaments," he said. "We quickly grew to expect that it wouldn't be much longer before the NAIA national tournament was canceled."

Beschta said it would be a few hours before everyone could get together as a team to talk about things, and by then all of the players knew it was over.

"The guys were all saddened of course, but under it all was a deeper feeling of loss knowing that the team, our family was finished," he said.

If you spend any time around the student-athletes donning the Golden Eagle jersey on game day, it wouldn't take long to understand the core values of the program that Beschta has been building since he arrived on campus in 2013. It's always about the team, the collective. The mantra finally manifested a year ago when JBU made a leap forward after four rebuilding seasons, combining for a 51-16 record since the start of the 2018-19 campaign.

Beschta said this group of young men were so incredibly close to one another and truly loved their brothers, so it was hard to accept that this team had played its last game together.

While the coaches and players grappled with the abrupt conclusion of a season that saw incredible improvements from the already outstanding year prior, including the program's first-ever undefeated season at home, the chaos continued.

"We then found out that everyone needed to leave campus in a matter of days, so we wouldn't even get to have the postseason time together before graduation. Throughout it all, there was just a feeling of acceptance of what happened, while being disappointed at the conclusion," Beschta said. "I never heard the guys complaining about things. Instead of focusing energy on what was lost, the guys seemed to focus on each other and the incredible bonds that had been built over the course of the season."

But in that moment, the JBU bench boss saw a manifestation of the team's foundational aspirations.



“It didn’t take long for the guys returning to start talking about what we are going to do next season and the high expectations we all share going forward,” Beschta said.

## The Next Race to Come

Moving forward in a COVID-19 world will take caution and wisdom. Many things, including what a 2020-21 season looks like, are still up in the air. Regardless of how it materializes, Beschta has the tools returning to duplicate the effort again in the wake of the unknown. The caveat – being at the ready for when the time comes.

“Going into an offseason where everyone is on their own, they may or may not have access to a gym, a hoop or a weight room. This summer won’t be like any other we have encountered. I challenged the guys to find a way to get better every day,” he said. “Around the country, every player is dealing with similar situations and limitations, but it is what you choose to do today that will make the difference going into next season. You can always find excuses to keep you from working hard, and those excuses are even easier to find now. But, you have to be committed to doing something, however small, each day.”

The team has been doing weekly Zoom calls to stay connected, to challenge each other and to continue growing as a unit. Despite being apart more than normal, Beschta believes they are going to come out of this situation even closer as a family.

As questions regarding the novel coronavirus continue to circulate even faster than the disease, taking a moment to reflect on this season, the accomplishments and the adversities alike, needs to happen. Too many extraordinary advancements for the program were realized, making the unceremonious close of the year even more disappointing. But even then, there is room for joy.

“Even without the opportunity to play in Kansas City, nothing that this team accomplished can be diminished,” Beschta said, having crossed the 100-win threshold in 2019 at the helm of the Golden Eagles. “Our guys came into the season with such a strong belief and high expectations, that it didn’t matter what others thought we were capable of. It is amazing how far that belief can take a team that is committed to each other, to playing extremely hard, never giving up, doing something together that none could accomplish on their own.”

While the next iteration of the Golden Eagles will look a little different, there is no doubt that Beschta and the team, using those core principles, will be ready for a new season and another opportunity to pursue that red championship banner.

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DENSIER CARNES

