ATHLETICS NEWS





2009 NAIA National Championship Men's Basketball Team inducted into

2019 HALL OF FAME

On March 24, 2009, the Rocky Mountain College men's basketball team cemented their place in school history by defeating Columbia College 77-61 in the 2009 Buffalo Funds-NAIA Division I Men's Basketball National Championship.

A testament to an incredible achievement, the 2009 championship trophy still sits on display in the Fortin Education Center. It will soon have company.

"This year, the 2009 NAIA National Championship men's basketball team will become a member of the 2019 Hall of Fame class," said Rocky Mountain College Director of Athletics, Jeff Malby. "They personified the proud tradition of Rocky Mountain College athletics. We are proud to announce this championship team and the other individuals who will receive the College's highest athletic honor."

The 2009 championship team's story is one of resiliency. Losing 71-53 to Westminster in the Frontier Conference Championship, Rocky entered the national tournament as unseeded underdogs.

"Rolling into the national tournament after getting beat by 18, there is self-doubt in your mind as a coach," said Wes Keller, who was the men's assistant coach under Head Coach Bill Dreikosen during the championship run. "Thankfully, we had good senior leadership. Our starting five knew how to win and they never got rattled."

They would need that confidence. Over the course of a week, the Battlin' Bears would have to defeat four teams to secure a spot in the championship.





Coach Wes Keller and Coach Bill Dreikosen celebrate after fulfilling a promise to allow the team to shave their heads after winning the 2009 NAIA Division I Men's Basketball Championship.



During the first round, Rocky narrowly slipped past Freed-Hardeman University in a close 78-77 overtime thriller. Holding Central Methodist to just 62 points in a second round win, the Battlin' Bears downed tournament veterans Concordia University and Robert Morris University in the quarterfinals and semifinals.

Trailing by double digits at halftime in three of those four tournament games, Rocky stayed composed under pressure and always found a way to win.

"We faced a lot of tough teams, but we all thought we belonged and that we could win," said James Bulluck, a starting forward during the championship season. "In the locker room we talked about how we weren't ready for the season to be over yet. To keep it going, you had to keep winning. So we kept grinding. All of us, from top to bottom."

Suddenly only Columbia College stood in the way of the national title. The 2009 championship was the first game in the history of the NAIA Men's Basketball Division I National Tournament in which two unseeded tournament teams faced each other in the championship.

Rocky's momentum was strong. By halftime, Rocky led Columbia College by 21 points.

"The team didn't let their own success distract them," said Dreikosen. "We stayed calm and focused on the game."

"We didn't really focus on the championship





during the game. We knew we wanted to come out and play the hardest we could and see what happens," said Bulluck. "It worked out in our favor. The game was awesome. Seeing the people who made it down and knowing it was my last game as a college player...the energy was electric."

All five of Rocky's starters scored in the double digits. Forward Devin Uskoski paved the way for the Battlin' Bears with an incredible 24 points and 20 rebounds. Guard Nate Richardson scored 14 points while Chase Sukut and James Bulluck posted 11 point performances in addition to Anthony Allen's 10.

"You're never confident until the buzzer sounds," Keller remarked. "Coach Dreikosen gets pretty fired up. He finally sits down and I turn to him and I say 'Enjoy this. This might never happen again. We're doing something a majority of people don't get to do. Let's enjoy the last moments.'"

The Battlin' Bears won 77-61, an eighteen point difference, over Columbia College.

Streamers fell down on top of the team as they gathered together to celebrate the victory. Rocky's Devin Uskoski was awarded Tournament MVP for his incredible performance.

Holding the trophy aloft, the players posed for a picture with the big red banner declaring them national champions before taking turns cutting down the net.

Eventually the celebrations died down. The gym emptied. But Dreikosen remained behind. "I just sat in the gym. The maintenance guys were the only ones walking around. It was empty, and I just sat there. I didn't want to leave," said Dreikosen. "I didn't want the moment to end."

Rocky Mountain College and the Billings community welcomed the team back with open arms. Fans lined Rimrock Road cheering as the team approached. A crowd of students greeted the players as they stepped off the bus.

A ceremony was held in Fortin Education Center with students crowding the bleachers with signs and banners signaling their support of the national champions.

"Somewhere along the line, we made a bet with the guys that if we win it all, they could shave our heads," Keller remarked with a smile. "They shaved our heads right in front of everybody in the bleachers"

A decade has passed. The team has since graduated and gone their separate ways. The hair may have grown back, yet the legacy remains.

The championship banner hangs above First Interstate Bank Court. The net sits atop the trophy in a display case on the upper concourse.

Coach Keller is still with the Battlin' Bears. He has been the head coach of the Rocky Mountain College women's basketball program since 2014. Bulluck now works as an assistant men's basketball coach for Rocky Mountain College. He also coaches Rocky's junior varsity men's team.

Coach Dreikosen ranks among the winningest active coaches in NAIA DI Men's Basketball. He is still the head men's basketball coach for Rocky Mountain College, a position he has held for two decades.

"My favorite memory has to be my faith in the Lord." He sits at his desk, arms folded at his chest, recalling an event that happened a decade prior. "There was a peace in me during the tournament that wasn't my own. I've been able to use that experience as a platform to talk about my faith during the tournament. That is the best part."

The 2009 championship team will be honored with the other inductees of the 2019 Clara Klindt Athletic Hall of Fame class during Homecoming on September 21, 2019.

Congratulations

2019 HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES

TEAM:
2009 Men's Basketball Team

INDIVIDUALS:
Mark Adams
Paul Edwards
Jeannie McGonagle
Jake Stuart

WILLIAM "BILL" WOOLSTON DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD:
Rick Reid & Crew