Hilltopper NIT History

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WKU Basketball’s impressive season that resulted in a deep run in the National Invitational Tournament only contributes to the school’s storied history with that tournament.

Amy Bingham takes us back more than 75 years in this week’s View from the Hill.

Did you know WKU has taken a team to the N.I.T thirteen times before this week’s latest trip to Madison Square Garden? The very first time was in 1942 and a man by the name of Dero Downing was on the team.

 “It’s just brought back so many memories and I’m glad I can still remember.”

Harriet Downing is talking about her freshman year, 1942, when her then-boyfriend Dero Downing (number 88) played in the National Invitational Tournament at Madison Square Garden.

 “I started a scrapbook and really started it about myself my freshman year and it ends up about three fourths of it is about Dero and basketball.”

Though she didn’t travel to New York, she and her classmates took up money to have the games broadcast on the radio in Bowling Green.

 She remembers one of Dero’s plays in particular.

 “He started to shoot and Coach Diddle yelled at him and said don’t shoot, don’t shoot. Well he shot and it went in and Diddle stood up and said that’s my boy, that’s my boy.”

This is a picture taken at the train station in Bowling Green the day the 1942 team, who lost in the finals, arrived home from New York.

It’s prominently featured in Diddle Arena’s Halls of History.

 “There are fans in the picture, student fans, youngsters from the community, business men odds and ends in a variety of ages.”

Paul Just has been an authority on WKU athletics for decades. He’s well versed on the prestige of the NIT.

 “We were a fixture in the NIT from the mid-40’s through the mid-50’s.”

 “If you had a choice between the NIT and NCAA you wanted to go to the NIT. That was THE tournament to be in.”

Just says it was largely because of the exposure teams received in the number one media market in the world.

The 2018 Hilltoppers got more exposure this week in the Big Apple and the WKU community couldn’t be more proud.

 “I think they are about as unselfish a team as I’ve ever seen. The way Coach Stansbury has melded them into this kind of team is remarkable I think.”

 ‘This will go down as one of my all time favorite teams. ‘

Dero Downing served as WKU President from 1969 to 1979.

The Hilltopper’s season ended Tuesday night with a loss to Utah in the semi-finals. They finished with a record of 27 and 11. .

With this week’s View from the Hill, I’m Amy Bingham.

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