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## Witherspoon does the impossible in Buffalo



Buffalo coach Reggie Witherspoon has transformed a losing program into a winner - 11-2 so far this season. (BUFFALO NEWS)

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There was no light at the end of the tunnel. Not in early December of 1999 when, five games into the basketball season, Reggie Witherspoon took over as men's basketball coach at the University of Buffalo.

The previous coach had been hastily dismissed for NCAA violations and, because of similar concerns, no assistant coach could be entrusted with the team. The Bulls had won seven of their last 30 games and had debuted in the Mid-American Conference the previous season with a 1-17 record. The

program was in tatters.

So the university turned to nearby Erie Community College and asked its coach, starting just his third season, to take over on an interim basis. Never did the word interim seem more appropriate.

### Tonight

- What: Toledo vs. Buffalo
- When: 7 p.m.
- Radio: 1370

Six-plus years later, Witherspoon and his Bulls find themselves among the MAC's premier programs. A year after reaching the league's tournament title game and winning a Division I postseason game for the first time, Buffalo brings an 11-2

record into tonight's game against Toledo at Savage Hall.

"Back then, the question was 'Reggie who?' " Akron coach Keith Dambrot said last weekend. "Now, the pertinent question is how long Buffalo will be able to keep him?"

Two seasons ago, the Bulls hit a six-game losing skid and dipped to 5-9. They had been through three years of NCAA probation, a grueling period, in Witherspoon's words, and were 31-97 under the

lanky coach.

During a lengthy bus trip home after back-to-back losses at Ohio and Marshall, Witherspoon made some tough decisions. He dismissed a couple players from the team and changed his personnel groupings. The Bulls are 46-15 since then.

They won 12 of 15 games to close the 2003-04 season and drew a record crowd of 8,971 to an opening-round MAC tournament home game before losing to Toledo in the quarterfinal round.

Last season, the Bulls set a school record for wins by going 23-10. They beat UT twice, once in the MAC tournament, and fell in the finale to Ohio 80-79 in overtime. An NIT victory over Drexel followed before a narrow 55-50 loss at St. Joe's.

Nobody is asking "Reggie who?" anymore.

Truthfully, that question wasn't being asked in western New York when Witherspoon was named to the job. He grew up 10 minutes from campus and was a ball boy at UB when his older brother played there. He was a successful coach at Sweet Home High School, which is adjacent to the university's campus, and then produced a 44-23 record in two seasons at Erie Community College, just a few miles away.

"I had a passion for the place from an early age and never lost it," he said yesterday. "So for all of the apparent problems, I looked at the job a little differently. I got a leave of absence [from Erie CC] and took it.

"We had a practice on Saturday when the biggest thing was learning the guys' names. We practiced twice on Sunday and once on Monday and played on Tuesday."

That was a home sellout against North Carolina, which would be a Final Four team.

He ran home for a change of clothes and arrived at the arena that evening and "tried to park in the same spot I'd left 40 minutes earlier," and a surly security guard said he'd have to park across campus.

"I'm coaching in the game," Witherspoon explained.

"No, you're not," the guard replied as a line of cars began to back up. "Turn it around, now! You want to make this easy or hard?"

"No, really, I'm UB's new head coach," said Witherspoon.

Figuring no one would admit to such a thing if it weren't true, the guard finally relented.

After a barrage of pregame TV interviews, Witherspoon asked where he could take a shower and change. He was directed to a small locker room next to the gym's sports medicine room. A few minutes later he emerged from the shower, dragging his towel behind him, and encountered a rather startled female trainer.

"I could write a book about that first season," Witherspoon said, laughing.

The Bulls led for much of his first game but, of course, lost to UNC 91-67.

"It was back to work the next day preparing for the next game," he recalled.

That was against Bob Knight and Indiana in Bloomington.

Whatever light was appearing at the end of the tunnel must have looked like an oncoming freight train.

Fortunately, for Witherspoon, the expectations weren't high.

"The administration told me, 'You may not win a single game. In fact, in all likelihood you won't win a single game.' I asked them what they wanted and all they asked was that I stabilize the program," he said.

When the Bulls produced three MAC victories - triple the previous season's total - the interim tag was removed. A couple more rough seasons followed during NCAA probation but, as Dambrot said, "You have to give UB credit for hanging in there and not giving up on Reggie. What he has done since is really remarkable. He has built a program and has a team that plays as hard as any in the league."

Witherspoon said he is "happy with what we have accomplished. The key word is we. I haven't done this by myself. But we're still a work in progress.

"I've told our players that no win or series of wins means that you can get away with giving less than your best effort. There are no rest stops in this conference. All you do is keep plugging away and hope you're still standing in March."

For a program that could do no more than trip over itself for the longest time, Witherspoon has the Bulls standing quite tall these days.

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