

FINISH

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ket and portal, we had a young man come in from the NAIA and was Player of the Year in our conference. There are a lot more similarities than differences. Budgets are different. Resources are different. Staffing is different. Offerings in sports are different. We're not an enrollment driver at Morehead State, we're a competitive driver whereas the NAIA is a little bit of both of those where you try to be as competitive as you can and also grow your enrollment. We're focused on trying to be successful and having a great student athlete experience. Some of those change, but we still operate on a family model. That's just a part of who we are. It's a part of my DNA. We have compliance, we have budgets and we have all of the things that are business related. Relationships are the things that matte to us the most."

Style of leadership  
 "It's almost like running any type of school building," Wells said. "A principal's job is a lot easier when all of his teachers are great. That's what I kind of tried to align here. Nobody calls me boss here because I'm a partner to them. I tell them all of the time, there's going to be days you're super glad I was a coach and there's going to be days that you're not going to be so glad I was a coach because I do know what's going on. Supporting the coaches is important to me, The hiring process is extremely important. You have to get the right people. There is pressure to have success at all levels — that's community related, academics and outputs on the field and the court. Finding the right people is important and then supporting them along the way by giving them the resources they need to be successful. That's the Human Resources as well as the financial resources. Trying to balance those competing needs is tough, but I will say that we do a good job here of making sure the connecting points are good."

One of those challenges has been the ascent of the transfer portal in Division I basketball. The portal changed everything.

The way school's approach recruiting.

The portal has made it tougher to keep players on rosters for all four years because they can enter the transfer portal at anytime.

"Retention is your biggest hurdle in all of that even from the kids' perspective," Wells said. "Every time they change an institution, that affects them academically. They're going to lose credits every time they transfer. Some things don't transfer. What you're doing is pushing graduation back on all kids when you do that. That's a hard part for me to understand why that's OK. I'm 100 percent for students rights and I understand that sometimes they have an opportunity just like coaches to move

and go different places and explore opportunities, but it has made it challenging retaining rosters and maintaining continuity. I'm glad our coaches are young because an older guy like myself — it drives me insane. For example our men's basketball team have half returning and had half new kids. Our women's basketball team — our entire roster is different. Weighing all of that, there's probably some good to it, but there's also some challenges on our side as well as the students' side. Any kid can go in the portal whenever they want to and find other opportunities. I think the stat was that there were 300 and some kids still left in the portal who don't have a place to go to school now because they left their institution. You're finding that at the NAIA level, you're finding that at the DI, DII and DII levels. Kids are either finding less opportunities or none at all, which is frustrating because if you have a kid who has an opportunity, you hate to see them lose that opportunity. The recruiting dynamics have changed. You're seeing a lot more high school kids available to us at this level that we used to not have a chance to get. With the transfer portal, you get a kid and you can plug and play and you rock and roll. That world has taken over the recruiting landscape. The conversations of the Power 4 or Power 5 are different than we have in the OVC. Trying to find your seat at the table in the portal is crazy. Resources matter. Money matters. We've won in the portal and we've lost in the portal. The younger coaches and younger generations are used to it. The old folks like me are probably a little bit harder."

Wells had to get used to the rules of NCAA DI as well because the NCAA has different rules than the NAIA.

Also the rise of Name, Image and Likeness and the ability for schools to pay athletes have changed things as well.

Morehead State is a small school and paying for NIL athletes isn't the same as a big school like the University of Kentucky or the University of Louisville.

He still tries to compete and win in the Ohio Valley Conference and hope his teams can get opportunities to play in the NCAA Tournaments.

"Access and it's just becoming normalcy," Wells said. "Three years ago, it was kind of unheard of because people didn't know the rules and didn't know the expectations. Then you add the element of agents getting involved in it, which it trickles down and every level is going to have them. Now the agents are involved in advising kids. Like any profession, there are good agents and bad agents who don't have the best interest of the kid in their heart. It creates some confusion. I will say there are some agents who do it right and do it well. On the other hand, when you ad-

vise kids wrong, I have a problem with that. That's become normal to have those conversations. When kids used to come to visit and come to my office, we talked about academic programs, where they eat, what's the gym look like and what's our culture like. Now, they come and the first thing they say is, 'What's my deal? What are you going to give me?' Recruiting is definitely different than it used to be."

It's tough for small DI schools to compete against the large conferences.

But Wells and his staff are promoting the school and athletics with social media and content creation.

Getting Morehead State's name out there is key in finding athletes who fit the each program.

"Content creation is a part of the reality of what we do," Wells said. "We hire people now just to do content creation. Social media is a big piece. Recognition is huge. We try to recruit nationally. We don't just try to stay in Morehead not that it's not important, but we have to get the word out. Whether to all of our alumni and supporters. There is a huge balance between internal and external and the best magnet to do that is through media. The newspapers of the world, the internet, the social media and all of that stuff ties in together to get the word out. It's just a huge part of what we are trying to do. We have good student involvement in that. We also have professionals who do all of our broadcasts and games on ESPN Plus. We put everything on air and put it on the radio as well. We're trying to reach the masses as best as we can. One person can't do it, so we have to rely on our media folks and professionals."

Recruiting is key. At UPike, Wells and

his staff approached recruiting locally and then expanding.

Now, he still wants that, but it's tougher to just focus on the local athletes.

Morehead State tries to identify the athletes who can play and compete at that level locally, but they are looking for athletes from all over to come in as well.

"I think it was little of both," Wells said. "I think recruiting regionally is the right thing to do. We try to get the kids regionally who fit and compete at a high level. We're not playing to be the best team in Morehead, we're playing to be the best in our league and get ourselves to the NCAA tournaments for those opportunities. All of those parts aren't just regionally. We've been in the international market. We've been to every edge of the borders to find folks who fit what we're trying to do. Hopefully, you're hearing the right word — fit. Fit is terribly important. That's why hiring good coaches who recruit the right way and getting the right kids makes our lives so much easier. We try to keep a regional focus, but then we expand and we'll even go international. Our women's basketball coach last year had 11 girls who were international student athletes. They were amazing human beings and amazing kids. The new coach coming in is going to have a different approach. She's going to have four international students and the rest will be domestic. Just trying to find the right fit of people is more important than the location."

Wells takes pride in all of the athletes at Morehead State, but he has a little different type of pride when the local athletes succeed.

"It really does give me a little extra pride to see them," Wells said. "I love all of our kids equal-

ly as well, but there's something in you when you have one of us who is a living trophy of one of us. You really root for them and want to see them do well. It's not just on the courts or on the field, but all around. You want to see them get an education and take it back and make a difference in wherever they're from. To have kids who walk in the same footprints that I've walked, you just naturally have an appeal to them and want to see them do good. We won't call names, but we have some recruits coming this year from the mountains and we're super excited about them. We'll support them, but it also brings community. A kid from California isn't going to bring a community. Our local kids are the ones who create that community. I think our fanbase and our alumni appreciate that. Diversity comes to our campus through athletics. Having good diversity is important to us, but certainly local flavor is something that you have to have to create that diversity."

Wells is Morehead State.

He is satisfied with being good.

Good enough is never good enough for him.

There's no finish line to the success he is trying to build.

He is one of the living trophies of the school and he wants to keep producing more and more success stories to impact communities and businesses after athletes leave Morehead State.

"It's a lot like coaching," Wells said. "Coaching has the ultimate highs and ultimate lows. I think that I've leveled that out a little bit better in my career. To see good stuff happen to this place makes me extremely excited. The goal coming here was to improve. Whatever that looked like and the best version

of that. When you see that moving in that direction, it is a humbling satisfaction to see good things happening because the people here deserve good things. The people here deserve it. The people in our region deserve it. This is an impactful place with worthwhile people. For me, to see the success come along with it — it is gratifying. I also know that July, 1 starts anew and you don't know where one stops and the next one starts. We're trying to do the same thing for this next group."

July 1 marked the start of a new season.

The countdown to the Fall Athletic Season has started.

The rush and thrill of the upcoming season reinvigorates Wells as he and his staff prepare to start things all over again for the 2026/2027 season.

"It's exciting," Wells said. "You go through that spell of that feeling when a season is over and winding down and you're exhausted — everything is after graduation and you can mellow down a little bit to now, you see the new fresh faces and the kids are excited and nervous. You get that excitement back again. That first football game is Family Weekend when we have it and it's going to be exciting. People are going to be roaming everywhere. That part is cool. I think it keeps you young a little bit. It keeps your emotions going. It is going to be exciting just as much as you're proud of them during graduation. You love sending them off to their careers and seeing them do good. Then, you get that excitement about that next group and you're like, 'Let's do it again with this group,' and we want to make them the best version we can make them."




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