

BY JEREMY CURTIS

SYRACUSE, N.Y. – West Virginia coach Bob Huggins vowed to take the Mountaineers to the national championship game the first day he arrived back at his alma mater three years ago.

Saturday night, Huggins took one enormous step closer to his promise when second seed WVU powered past top seed Kentucky, 73-66, winning the NCAA East region and marching on to the Final Four.

“I came back to win it for the university, having played there and for the great people in our state,” said Huggins. “The wonderful thing about these guys is they never doubt it. They just said, ‘OK, that’s what we have to do. We’re going to go do it.’”

WVU had not beaten UK since 1959, which is also the last time the Mountaineers reached the Final Four.

“I think there were times that the inexperience hurt us,” UK coach John Calipari said of his youthful, but supremely talented team. “I thought this could have been the final game – us against them. Really. They’re that good.”

“Forty-nine states picked us to lose,” WVU star Da’Sean Butler said of an ESPN.com fan poll that heavily favored UK. “Obviously, we wanted to make everybody upset. I knew we were going to win. It was a matter of how we were going to do it.”

Butler scored a team-high 18 points and made four three-pointers.

Joe Mazzulla, who was named the East region MVP following the game, turned in a valiant effort and career night against the vaunted Wildcats.

The 6-foot-2, 200-pound Mazzulla was the smallest player on the court, but willed the Mountaineers with a larger than life performance, netting a career-best 17 points on five of 11 shooting. He also contributed three assists, two steals, a rebound and countless hustle plays that fired up the bi-partisan Carrier Dome crowd, before fouling out.

“If Joe doesn’t play with great enthusiasm, he’s not very good,” Huggins said. “That’s what kind of puts him over the top.”

It was Mazzulla who frustrated the 6-foot-11 DeMarcus Cousins at the bottom of the Mountaineers stifling 1-3-1 zone defense. It was Mazzulla who sparked the offense by attacking UK’s man-to-man defense. And at the end of the night, it was Mazzulla cutting down and wearing the net around his neck like a patch of a decorated soldier.

“We didn’t come here to make it to the Final Four and lay it down,” he said. “We just have to enjoy it the rest of the night and have the mindset that we have 80 minutes left to really do something special.”

Though WVU (31-6) won by seven points and kept UK (35-3) at arm’s length the majority of the second half, it wasn’t all easy.

“Bobby just had guys grind it, grind it, grind it and they were getting lay-ups,” said Calipari.

Once again, the Mountaineers found a way to win amid a porous offensive start. WVU was just three of 17 from the field in the game’s opening 13 minutes.

But they climbed back into the game shockingly behind a barrage of eight first half three pointers. Wellington Smith connected on the first trey, then it was Kevin Jones, Mazzulla, on his first of the season, Butler, Jones again, and finally Butler swishing in three more from beyond the arc.

When the rain from deep range subsided, WVU owned a 24-20 lead, and extended the margin to 28-26, by halftime. For the first time all season, the Mountaineers went an entire half without netting a two-point field goal.

Huggins' trademark man-to-man defense was shelved for most of the game in favor of the lengthy, stretched and extended 1-3-1 zone. Devin Ebanks was a nightmare at the top, Butler, Smith and Jones manned the middle and Mazzulla roamed the baseline switching side to side, following the path of the basketball.

UK did find success penetrating the wings of the zone and dumping the ball down low to Cousins, who scored 15 points, but the Wildcats could do little else offensively. UK struggled from 3, missing their first 20 attempts. The Wildcats did not make a 3 until DeAndre Liggins connected with just 3:28 to go. They shot 34 percent for the game and were just 16 of 29 from the free throw line.

John Wall, UK’s freshman phenom who will likely be the top player picked in June’s NBA Draft, scored a game-high 19 points and had nine rebounds, five assists, five turnovers and four steals.

He played 39 of 40 minutes, but in the end, it wasn’t enough.

“You give hats off for them,” Wall deferred. “Their defense did a great job on us and we didn’t knock down shots today.”

Huggins improved to 8-1 all-time against Calipari and WVU has now won 10 games in a row.

Next weekend in Indianapolis, the Mountaineers will meet the winner of Sunday’s Elite Eight match-up between No. 3 seed Baylor (28-7) and No. 1 seed Duke (32-5), out of the South region.

“Everything is in vain unless you win the whole thing,” Butler said. “We just try to do that.”

“We definitely did it for the state of West Virginia,” Jones said, who had 13 points and eight rebounds. “We still have another mission – the national championship.”