

WVU rifle is back on campus

By **JOHN McCOY**
DAILY MAIL OUTDOORS EDITOR

It took a barrage of public support to put West Virginia University's rifle team back on the firing line, and the people associated with the team are grateful for it.

University officials reinstated the team to full varsity status on Thursday, less than a year after they eliminated it from the school's roster of intercollegiate sports. WVU President David Hardesty cited an "overwhelming" public clamor as the main reason for the reinstatement.



BEASLEY

"The outpouring of public and private support we've received on this issue has been overwhelming," Hardesty said. "That support was reflected in a decision by the Legislature

to appropriate \$100,000 to help fund the team."

WVU officials plan to combine the legislative appropriation with a still-to-be-determined amount pledged by rifle-team supporters to restore the program to the status it enjoyed when it won 13 NCAA championships during the 1980s and 1990s.

Coach Marsha Beasley, whose teams captured eight of those titles, called the reinstatement "an affirmation of how much people admire and respect the accomplishments of the team."

"The people of this state care deeply about the team," says Beasley, who will be rehired to continue coaching the squad. "I think the Legislature took this as an important issue, which speaks to the grassroots support."

Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, one of the lawmakers who pushed hardest to have the team reinstated, called the public's demand for the team "unprecedented."

"We received petitions with 7,000 names on them, all calling for the team's reinstatement," Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, said.

Rifle

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"I can't think of any issue that's ever gotten that strong a response."

She said she received pleas from people far outside her Morgantown district.

"I've heard from people all over the state and even from outside the state," she said. "I even had one woman offer to wear a sandwich board calling for the team's reinstatement."

Some WVU supporters and alumni showed their displeasure with the rifle team's demise by putting financial pressure on the school's administration. One athletic-department contributor reportedly asked to have his contribution returned. A woman reportedly wrote the university out of her will. Fleischauer said another woman canceled orders for four season basketball tickets and four season football tickets.

"Those people were saying, 'This is an excellent program. It has a wonderful national and in-

ternational reputation. We want this. It's important to us," she said. "There's a pride in the excellence the rifle team has shown. WVU's slogan is 'Where Greatness is Learned.' The rifle program defines greatness."

Despite the intense public support, WVU administrators as late as Wednesday appeared reluctant to put the Legislature's \$100,000 appropriation to its intended use. Fleischauer said it "took a while" for Hardesty and athletic department officials to warm to the idea.

"They didn't want any legislation," she said. "But according to the state constitution, the Legislature has the power to make appropriations. It's our job. All kinds of things in the university's budget are subject to line items. We put one in to help out the rifle team."

She attributed administrators' early reluctance to accept the appropriation on poor communication. "I'm not sure, but I think not all of them were talking with

one another. I think ultimately the decision was made at the top, and I'm glad it was," she said.

Some of Hardesty's comments following the reinstatement appeared to show his unease with the decision.

"This could be a dangerous precedent, but I hope it's not," Hardesty said. "I think there's something unique about the way the people of West Virginia feel about the (rifle) team. I'm not opposed to the sport, but I live in a world of ambiguity. This was not a pure decision, but I felt I had to support the legislative appropriation."

Nicole Allaire, a senior at WVU and a one-time member of the rifle squad, said it "would have been nice for the decision to have been made in time for me to compete" during her final season, but said she's happy that others will now get the chance to shoot for the team.

Allaire currently is helping to organize a fund-raising drive — a raffle that she said should net

\$200,000 to put toward the team's future expenses.

"The grand prize is a custom WVU rifle-themed motorcycle built by Orange County Choppers," she says. "In addition, we'll be drawing for 200 rifles, four 4-wheelers, a 42-inch plasma TV and a \$2,500 cash prize."

She said buyers already have snapped up most of the 10,000 tickets at \$50 apiece.

"There's a deep level of support from the people of West Virginia," she said. "We're seeing that now. I expect all the tickets to be gone well before the July 31 drawing."

Ed Seitz, a self-described "rifle fan" who has attended each of the Mountaineers' national championship competitions since 1993, said he knows exactly why state residents pushed so hard to get the team reinstated.

"It's a point and source of pride for West Virginians," he said. "They felt it needed to be preserved, and it's as simple as that."