

## STATEMENT FROM RAEQUAN BATTLE

As many of you know, the NCAA has recently denied my appeal for immediate eligibility at WVU. I am completely devastated by the NCAA's decision to deny me eligibility for the 2023-24 basketball season. As you may not know, my decision to attend WVU was not like most transfers; my transfer came when I lost my Coach at Montana State. This situation that I, nor any student athlete has any control over, severely affected me and my mental health; struggles that impact my everyday life. I will not detail the trauma that I have faced throughout my childhood and college life, but those who do know my story understand how badly I need the game of basketball as part of a comprehensive process to improve my well-being and mental health.

Anyone who watches or follows college athletics has seen, heard, and been told over and over by the NCAA, especially in their advertisements, that they want the best for their student athletes' careers and wellbeing. So, I expected the NCAA to understand the totality of my situation and why I chose to enroll and compete at West Virginia University this season. However, the NCAA has failed me, my family, my community, my team and everything they say they stand for when it comes to a student athlete.

At the end of the 2022-23 season, I was presented with three (3) options.

My first option, staying at Montana State, felt impossible even though I greatly appreciated my time there. With basketball being one of my main sources of constructive output, a welcomed escape from some of my issues, and thus a vital part of my mental health therapy, my head coach at MSU was my main stay of support and guidance for me as a student there. When he accepted a new role at another university, it took an immediate toll on me, and it became obvious to me that I would struggle greatly staying in the same place without him. Several mental health counselors I worked with agreed that seeking a new school would be the best thing for my mental health.

My second option was to follow my former coach to his new university. As NCAA rules state, I could have done this to maintain eligibility. However, graduating college has always been a priority for me, my family, and my tribe. In the process of exploring this option I learned that my graduation date would be significantly set back if I choose this option. Given my professional goals, the support network I need, and the financial capabilities of my family, my educational goal needed to happen soon. At the time, I believed that the NCAA would understand the need to prioritize my academics and my special circumstance.

My third and final option was to trust the NCAA to understand a student-athlete's need to meet both mental health and academic goals. I spent significant time working with my family, community leaders, and counselors to understand the intricacies of the two-time transfer waiver guidelines. We researched and inquired of institutions that had people in place that would understand my situation and the struggles I have endured in my life to get to this point. We felt like and determined that I met the guidelines for having special circumstances and a mental health waiver, so I entered the portal.

When I visited West Virginia University, I was candid about my personal struggles and academic goals. In response, the staff detailed the support that would be provided to me and assured me that I could graduate on time. My relationship with the program reached another level when I met now Head Coach, Josh Eilert. He had lived on a Native American reservation when he was younger, just as I had, and I quickly felt close to him. The solace I found in that relationship cannot be overstated.

I chose WVU after a careful search process and a thorough evaluation of my options, because my counselors and I felt I needed to attend a school that offered me the best opportunities for my well-being. I chose WVU in no small part because of their commitment and facilities to help me deal with those personal issues in a constructive way. I chose to play for WVU because Coach Eilert having spent significant time living on a Native American reservation and understood what I was dealing with and the struggles I was facing. I could instantly tell he understood where I was coming from and what I was dealing with. I knew this was the best place for my mental health and academic career. Since arriving at WVU, I have received incredible treatment and support for my mental health, advanced in and enjoyed my classes, and grown even closer to Coach Eilert.

The NCAA has a process for students like me, folks whose well-being is directly tied to the school they attend. I have followed their procedures and made my requests through all proper channels and at all points I have heard nothing more from the NCAA but 'denied.' I have been through two coaching changes in three months. All student athletes are free to transfer with a coaching change, except if you had previously transferred, regardless of the reasoning. It feels as though my mental health issues and my extenuating circumstances are not valid in the eyes of the NCAA and that is very painful to me. It is not lost on me that my issues—issues that are so common across Native American communities, yet so often discounted and ignored—are now being ignored and waved away by an NCAA—the same NCAA that does not count a single Tribal College or University among its members. It is not lost on me that NCAA, an institution which has all but ignored Native Americans and their concerns, has simply shut the door on me now that I've found a healthy outlet and constructive, wholistic approach to my well-being. Instead, they seem determined to take away one of the few constructive and successful outlets I've had in my life.

Today many people may be cynical about college sports, but WVU basketball has offered me the outlet to carry a flag for Native Americans, my Tribe and my family, and turn what otherwise would be lifelong struggles into constructive growth as a person and as a Native American. Being the first person from my Tribe to play Division 1 basketball and the first person from my Tribe to participate in the NCAA tournament is a beacon for other kids like me that are faced with these types of issues to not give up. That's the real promise of college sports and that is what the NCAA is supposed to be all about. Those are the values the NCAA often pays lip service to.

I take great pride in representing Native American communities around the U.S., I can only imagine the frustration felt by my family and friends of the Tulalip Tribe. To the Tulalip Tribe: I am sorry. I made the best decision I could, given the situation I was unwillingly presented, the information I had and the misplaced belief that the NCAA would be true to their purpose. I give you my word I will continue working to bring pride to our community in any way I can.

The state of West Virginia has become a second home to me, and my teammates have become a second family. My hope is that the NCAA will understand what it is doing is wrong, that it will realize that it is going against everything it is supposed to stand for when it made this decision, and it will look at the facts and reverse itself. But more than that, even if I never play another game of basketball, I will not go quietly. At a minimum I will be one more Native American voice shouting into the ears of an institution that is all too oblivious of its failings and prejudices.

Thank you to all those who have supported me, including my past and current coaches and fans and the people of West Virginia, who have embraced me with open arms.

