

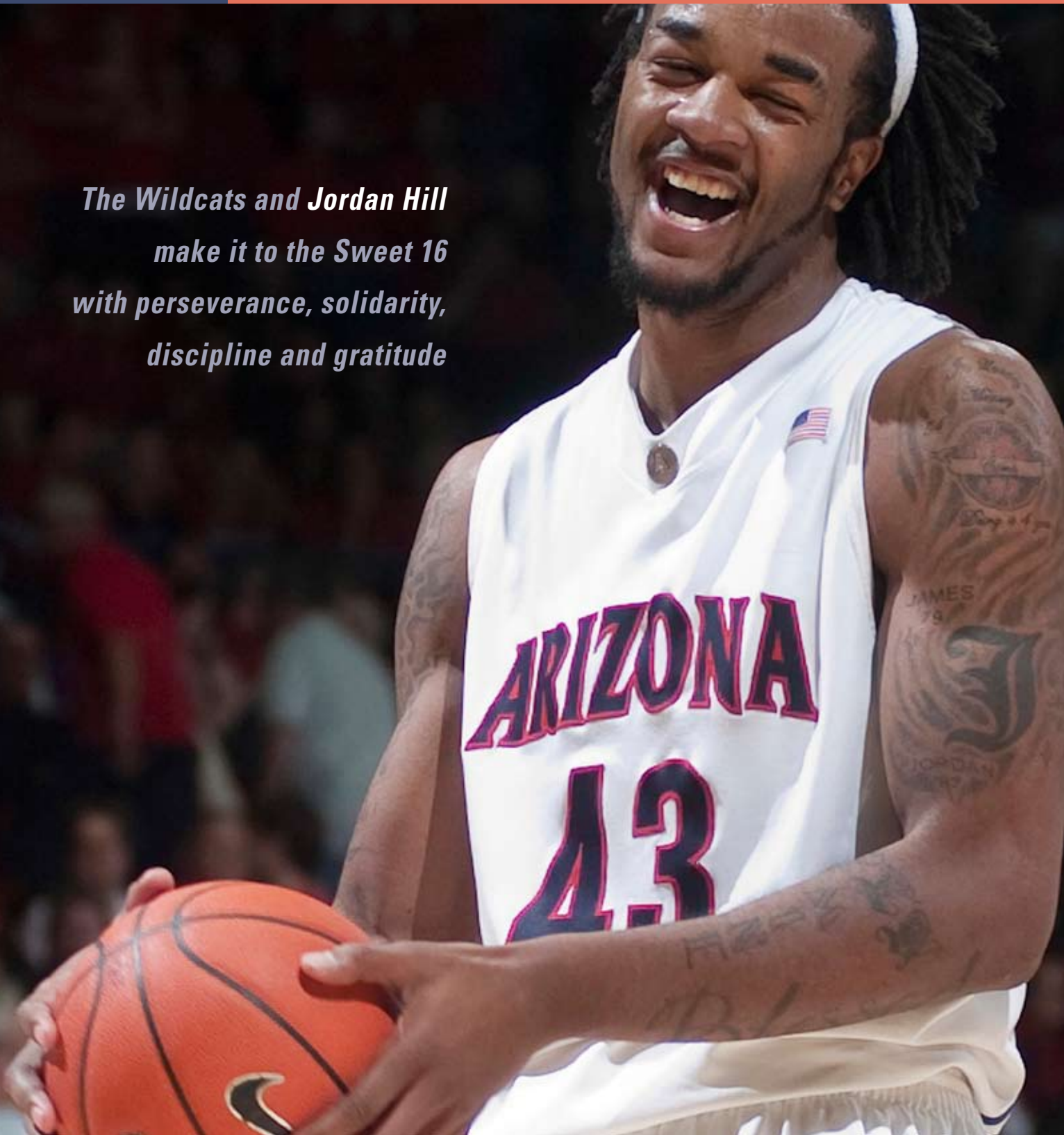
Virtue In Action

The Method Behind the Madness

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

*The Wildcats and Jordan Hill
make it to the Sweet 16
with perseverance, solidarity,
discipline and gratitude*





THE METHOD BEHIND THE MADNESS

Some sports commentators thought the University of Arizona men's basketball team didn't have a fighting chance in the NCAA year-end tournament known as "March Madness." The legendary Wildcats experienced serious setbacks this season, including longtime coach Lute Olson retiring last October due to health problems. Interim coach Russ Pennell replaced Olson, a Hall of Famer, who was long considered one of the secrets of the team's long term success.

The placement of Pennell itself seemed risky, as he was a recent addition to the team. The New York Times dubbed the situation a "coaching carousel." That's why nobody expected what came next: the Wildcats' making it all the way to the Sweet 16. The young men unleashed a strong athletic performance largely unaffected by a setback that might have sunk other teams.

The Wildcats and their coach made it to the Sweet 16

through a combination of focus, **solidarity**, **perseverance**, and **discipline**. The team's junior forward and rising star, Jordan Hill, makes their success even more special. The 21-year-old student faced significant obstacles in his personal life, yet through **perseverance** and **discipline** became a rising star.

Overcoming the Coaching Carousel

Assistant coach Russ Pennell was as surprised as anyone to find himself at the helm of the Wildcats in the beginning of the season. "Obviously, when I woke up this morning, I didn't expect to be sitting in front of you," ESPN.com quoted Pennell as saying at a press conference when he first landed the high-pressure job. Indeed, it was a surprising move.

After Olson retired from the team, after just over 25 years, Associate Head Coach Mike Dunlap declined an offer to replace him, according to Sports Illustrated. That left Pennell, who had only recently joined the Wildcats' coaching staff after a stint as an elite high school team

coach and radio broadcaster for Arizona State.

But Pennell wasted no time asserting his leadership of the legendary Wildcats team. Pennell refused to spend time wondering if he would be able to keep the high-profile coaching job once the season ended. “When I was a kid, my dad used to talk about coaches who are always looking for their next job,” Pennell said of his father, Dewey, who also was the director of basketball operations at University of Arizona. “He’d say, ‘Do well at the job you’re at, and the next job will find you.’”

Pennell focused on getting the best performance out of the team. “You’ve got a group of kids sitting downstairs that have been rocked to the core, which shows their great love and admiration for the man they came here to play for, coach Olson,” Pennell said, according to ESPN.com. “But I also know from talking to those kids today that they’re competitors, that they’re Wildcats, that they want to carry on the great tradition that the University of Arizona has enjoyed over the last couple of years.”

Team Spirit

This focus on the team as a whole and its historic tradition helped build a sense of unity, a sense of **solidarity** within the team. The men of the Wildcats rallied around their new leader with even the youngest players stepping in to play a strong role in victories over teams including Gonzaga and Kansas, according to the Arizona Star Net newspaper.

“I felt how quickly our young guys would get ramped up to speed would tell us about our team,” UA assistant coach, Dunlap, told the Arizona Star Net. “Somewhere right around Christmas time, those young guys, Kyle Fogg, Jamelle (Horne), started doing some stuff. Even Alex (Jacobson) had a couple of moments where he helped us. All of a sudden those guys were contributing.” Even those who didn’t get as much game time as they wanted stepped in to keep spirits high.

This sense of total team effort and **solidarity** paid off, taking the Wildcats all the way to the Sweet 16. But at the end of March, they were eliminated from the tourney by the Louisville Cardinals 103 to 64. But the blowout did not dampen their spirits or feelings of brotherhood, players said. They walked away with pride in

their accomplishments. “This is the best team ever, man,” junior forward Jordan Hill told the media. “This is the best team since I’ve been here. We’ve been through a lot of ups and downs, people doubting us, people not thinking we should have been in the tournament.” Not only did the Wildcats prove that they deserved to be in the tournament, they also proved that by persevering through setbacks and maintaining a sense of team unity they could make it to the tournament’s final stages.



ESPN.com photos

King of the Hill

Hill loved his teammates and his coaches, as evident in his post Sweet 16 comments during which he compared them to family and credited them, in part, for his success. But success did not come easily. Despite his obvious athleticism, the power forward only played for two years in high school before being discovered by then-coach Olson, the DailyWildcat.com reported.

“He didn’t know much about the game, but you could tell he could play,” the now-retired Olson said of Hill, according to the Tucson Citizen “He’d run and jump with so much athleticism. He’d block shots with great timing.”

Hill overcame his lack of extensive basketball experience with a mixture of responsibility, discipline, personal fortitude and the support of his coach. He did not travel an easy route to get to the spotlight. Hill’s mother died of breast cancer when he was only three and, as a result, lived what Arizona Daily Star writer Bruce Pascoe described as a “nomadic lifestyle” initially living with his grandmother until, at 13, he moved in with his truck-driver father.

“I had a rough time growing up,” Hill told Virtue in Action during a recent phone interview. “I kept moving from place to place. I was with my grandmother for a while, but she couldn’t take care of me because I was being a bad boy at the time.”

It’s understandable that it would have been difficult for Hill as a young boy and teenager. Not only did his mother die, but his father, a long-haul truck driver was unable to spend much time with him, and even had to ask family friends to pitch in to take him to basketball games. Sadly, many individuals who have difficult family

situations early in life turn to destructive behavior or struggle in school. Fortunately, Hill had the **fortitude** to choose another path.

Hill said he made a personal decision in his early teens to take **responsibility** for his life and to better himself. “I calmed down,” Hill said. “I told myself to get on the right track and stay on it.”

Hill decided to focus on sports, initially baseball, but as he continued to grow in height, basketball piqued his interest. His love of basketball was threatened during his junior year as his grades slipped, but as he learned to do earlier, he got back on track and focused renewed energy on his school work .

It’s clear in listening to Hill that **discipline** and hard work are two of the pillars of his success. He said he felt he had an athletic talent he “couldn’t waste.”

“I just kept proving myself and kept working hard,” Hill also told the Tucson Citizen of his personal and athletic journey. “I went on the court and had to prove everything I did. It’s helped me become the person I am now.” Hill also has a strong sense of **gratitude**, crediting his high school and college coaches for helping him advance toward his potential.

After the Madness

The story of the University of Arizona’s rise during March Madness is a Cinderella story, but the fairy tale offers a bittersweet ending. Pennell did not get the coaching job beyond this season. However, even after this significant disappointment, Pennell continues to lead in showing us how to approach life with a sense of balance and gratitude. Pennell told AP of his UA experience, “I’ll forever be indebted because I think (this experience) made me a better coach and a better person. If this is the only opportunity, so be it. Life goes on.” Fortunately, Pennell now has another opportunity as he was recently hired to work as men’s basketball coach for the ambitious program at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix.

Hill , a junior, has decided to leave UA in order to declare for the NBA. According to the Tucson citizen, he will begin working in Chicago with Michael Jordan’s former

trainer. Fortunately, Hill is still approaching his life with a sense of balance and **wisdom** in expressing as much interest in his education as his future in sports. He has vowed to take classes online to complete his education, according to the Tucson Citizen. “I made a promise to myself,” Hill told the paper about his degree. “You’re not going to play basketball forever. When you hang up your shoes, you want to have that diploma.”

Hill also expresses gratitude for his lot in life, commenting in an interview with the DailyWildcat.com; “I went through crazy stuff growing up and never thought I’d be in this position. I’m just thankful for this opportunity.

God, you know, He’s real”. In reflecting on the factors that helped him succeed, Hill also told the DailyWildcat.com “I guess it’s just hard work... It’s a blessing.” How many of us view hard work as a blessing?

Although Hill and the Wildcats didn’t make it to the championship, their unlikely rise to the Sweet 16 can inspire us all to approach our lives and the inevitable obstacles that arise with a sense of **perseverance** and **discipline**, and with a sense of **gratitude** for all of the opportunities we have to work toward our goals.

Vocabulary

Carousel: a merry-go-round, as one at an amusement park

Adversity: a condition marked by misfortune, calamity, or distress

Nomadic: life of a person with no fixed residence who roams about

Discipline: training expected to produce a specific benefit, moral or mental improvement

Solidarity: a shared common interest, loyalty within a group

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable, pursuing excellence

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

Fortitude: mental and emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity

Gratitude: a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, understanding or common sense and insight; the ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting

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Highlighted Virtues:

Solidarity
Perseverance
Discipline

Lesson Goals

- Help students understand the power of perseverance, fortitude, discipline, and responsibility in striving for excellence in sports and in life
- Encourage a sense of responsibility in our own lives by making a commitment to persevere in overcoming obstacles and setbacks
- Encourage students to consider how others have contributed to their lives and to express gratitude to those individuals
- Model for students the importance of solidarity and unity when a team or any group is striving for a goal and unexpected obstacles arise



cover photograph courtesy Arizona Wildcats

Discussion Question Options

1. What setback did the University of Arizona Wildcats face at the beginning of their season?
2. How did Russ Pennell react to his new role? Explain whether or not he was concerned about keeping his interim job. Which virtue did Pennell's attitude encourage within the team?
3. Name at least one way the Wildcats exhibited solidarity?
4. What were the personal challenges and obstacles that Jordan Hill faced in his life?

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5. What significant change in attitude toward life put Hill on the path to success?
6. What are the virtues and related actions that enabled Jordan Hill to succeed?
7. What was bittersweet about the Wildcats' March Madness story? What virtues and positive attitudes did Coach Pennell display in his public statements after learning that he wouldn't be the permanent head coach?
8. How do the Wildcats' and Jordan Hill's stories go beyond just sports? What virtues did they display that can be applied to our lives?

Journal Writing Options

1. Write about a defeat or disappointment in your life concerning something that was really important to you. How did you handle the setback? Now look at the attitude and perspective coach Pennell displayed when he wasn't named head coach. Given the benefit of his example, does this now change how you view the setback in your life?
2. Jordan Hill experienced a lot of instability during his younger years. Write about the virtues and actions that

enabled him to rise above these challenges and become a success?

Extended Learning Activities

1. Have the students select and prepare a brief report on an inspirational athlete or entertainment figure that has experienced and overcome personal setbacks. Ask them to outline why they identify with that person, what are the specific virtues and actions that enabled him/her to overcome the obstacles, and how that person's reaction to adversity can help others.
2. Play reporter: Have the students come up with 5 questions they would like to ask Jordan Hill or Coach Russ Pennell if they could talk to either man.

Related Links

- "Hill Holds Court off Court like a Real Pro," by Greg Hansen <http://www.azstarnet.com/sports/285879>
- "Hill has Serious Game after Major Evolution," by Bruce Pascoe <http://www.azstarnet.com/sports/281894>
- "Chemistry, this Year More than Ever, Key for Wildcats," by Bruce Pascoe <http://www.azstarnet.com/sn/wildcats/>

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