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WVU President Michael Benson meets students inside Reynolds Hall during a tour of the building on Wednesday afternoon. (Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post)

WVU SPORTS

Even with athletics background, Michael T. Benson to leave WVU sports to Wren Baker

May 15, 2025 1:14 pm by Spencer Ripchik, The Dominion Post

MORGANTOWN — BYU basketball has had numerous well-known players who wore the blue and white. One of them, who people might not have known, is West Virginia's new president Michael T. Benson.

Benson took a tour of Reynolds Hall on Wednesday, and one of his favorite parts, other than seeing the modern learning facility, was looking at the basketball court floor that Mountaineer great Jerry West played on, framed on one of the walls.

Benson's main focus is on academics and overall growth in WVU, making it an excellent learning experience, but his background is entangled in athletics.

While having an interest in athletics, Benson's going to keep a hands-off approach when he takes office in July because of how much he respects athletic director Wren Baker.

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“Wren, to me, is one of the finest athletic directors in America,” Benson said. “It’s clear he knows what he’s doing. He’s coming from stints at Oklahoma and, of course, at North Texas. We’ve developed a really good relationship. I’ve told him I’ll be as involved as he wants me to be.”

Benson dabbled in athletics when he was at Coastal Carolina. In 2020, Benson pitched to his athletic director to do a home-and-home series with his alma mater, BYU. Both teams were undefeated, and one of his friends was the then-BYU athletic director, Tom Holmoe.

Benson picked up the phone and made the call to Holmoe.

“I said, Tom, we’re both undefeated. Let’s do a home and home,” Benson said. “He said, ‘Well, the Big 12 is kind of keeping us on a tight schedule.’ They weren’t in the Big 12 at the time. They were playing independent. ‘Let’s talk about it later.’ Well, it turns out later was about two weeks because on our schedule was Liberty, and they had a COVID case, so they had to cancel the game. BYU needed a game... We signed the deal. It was a nationally televised game. If you remember, Coastal beat BYU and ruined their undefeated season.”

Benson said he will be fully rooting for West Virginia when it plays his alma mater Oct. 3.

West Virginia’s athletic success was solid in 2025 for the fall and winter. Benson brought up the success and mentioned the Learfield Directors Cup, which is the rankings of athletics departments in Division I sports. In the most recent rankings that included the winter sports, West Virginia was ranked 24th.

“We’re doing okay right now,” Benson said. “All that to say, we are really punching above our weight class. If you look at budgets, we’re in a relatively small market. We may be the smallest market in all of the Big 12. In fact, we’ve got to be. I’m trying to think, Stillwater, Waco, Provo, everybody’s bigger than we are. And yet, look at what we get out of what we invest.”

One of Benson’s favorite parts of coming to West Virginia is that Morgantown is a college town. He likes to see the town filled on Saturdays, students walking around and WVU logos on everything. In the short time he’s been here, Benson’s understood how important West Virginia’s athletics play in the mood of the town.

“With no professional teams here, the citizens of the state, in so many ways, tie their kind of hopes and dreams to how well WVU does,” Benson said. “As I understand, Morgantown swells into the biggest city in the state on a Saturday afternoon. Everybody comes in from all over, and it creates this environment where alumni are so excited to be back on campus. They see their friends. They cheer for their team.”

Part of the well-being will be how well the football team does. Towards the end of last year, the mood was somber, especially with the high expectations. Baker made a change, and Rich Rodriguez is back.

Benson’s familiar with Rodriguez. Coastal Carolina played Rodriguez’s former team, Jacksonville State, last year to open the season. The Chanticleers won 55-27.

The two have met since. Rodriguez recently gave Benson a tour of the football facilities.

“We absolutely boat raced them in their place,” Benson said. “He was so mad at the end of the game. I remind him of that... It’s cool that he’s come full circle. He recognizes the challenges from when he left the first time, and how grateful he is to have this second opportunity. Sometimes you don’t get two chances. I’m happy for him.”

Benson hasn’t been to too many WVU sporting events, yet. He attended the WVU women’s basketball’s NCAA tournament games in Chapel Hill (N.C.) in March.

It’s clear Benson does enjoy athletics. Even with his enjoyment, Benson will leave that part of WVU to Baker and just help when he can.

“Whatever I can do to help support, yes, the kind of advancement of the university, most importantly, on the academic side,” Benson said. “But also ensure that we compete in the Big 12 and beyond.”

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