

GRANTLAND

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Hurry Up and Wait

Jim Crutchfield's West Liberty University is the fastest offense in college basketball — and they win. So why isn't anyone else trying to catch up?

BY [MICHAEL WEINREB](#) ON FEBRUARY 20, 2013



People often ask Jim Crutchfield to describe his system, and he has nothing to show them. He does not possess any notes, he has never put anything on video, and the only time he spoke at a coaching clinic, it was because he was trying to angle for an exhibition against a nearby Division I team (a game that has yet to be scheduled, and may never be scheduled). Everything he knows about basketball is filed and collated between his graying temples. He is 57 years old, and until he became the head coach at a Division II college in rural West Virginia nine years ago, he was also in charge of the tennis team; he inherited a squad that went 4-23 the year before and graduated most of its starters,

and somehow he's molded it into one of the most successful and intriguing programs in the country. These days, he often gazes up at the scoreboard at the end of a game and thinks, *How did we put up so many points?*

"We didn't play high-risk defense last night, and in the second half we didn't extend to trapping hardly at all," he is telling me. "And yet at the end we still had 95 on the board. We ran the shot clock down in the last few minutes, and we still scored 50 in the second half."

It is a Tuesday morning in the town of West Liberty, which consists of not much more than a college campus and a Domino's pizza franchise situated eight miles up a crooked two-lane state highway from Wheeling, just north of a severe horseshoe curve.¹ Crutchfield is sitting at his desk, near a window that overlooks the 1,200-seat arena where, the night before, his Hilltoppers avenged their only loss of the season, to a University of Charleston team with four Division I transfers on the roster. He is an extremely laid-back man with a prominent chin who reminds me a little bit of Mike D'Antoni in happier times. He seems to revel in his contrarian tendencies, largely because they've paid off: Over the past four years, his teams have won 119 games and lost eight (they're 25-1 this season) and they've made the Division II Elite Eight twice, merely by taking advantage of what one of Crutchfield's players calls the "glitch in the system," which centers on the idea that college basketball does not have to be contrived in order to be successful.

¹ *On my first trip up this road, I nearly plowed my rented Toyota Camry into a family of crossing deer. They did not appear to be hustling at all.*

This season, West Liberty is putting up about 106 points a game, a number that eclipses the output of the highest-scoring Division I team by nearly two dozen and bests the output of the typical Division I team by nearly 40 points. The Hilltoppers average more than 80 possessions per game, and they average over 1.3 points per possession, both more than any team in Division I; their assist-to-turnover ratio also outrates that of any D-I squad. Crutchfield's teams press full-court, and they throw long outlet passes in transition, and everyone on his roster can shoot from long-range and handle the ball in the open floor. They are not particularly tall, and they are not especially athletic — Crutchfield hasn't taken on a Division I transfer or a junior-college player in his nine

years as coach, because he wants his players to grow into his system — but under Crutchfield, they have fielded a perpetual rotation of interchangeable and under-recruited kids who work themselves into superior shape and then just kind of do everything well.

You could sense it taking hold in the second half against Charleston: West Liberty held a two-point lead and slowly extended it, and soon enough it was double-digits, and even when Charleston made a run you could see that they were gassed, that their legs were giving out from continually pushing the ball downcourt. Facing a zone defense, the Hilltoppers went 16-of-36 from 3-point range (eight players hit at least one), and they had 19 assists and seven turnovers and 15 offensive rebounds.

“A lot of teams will play with us in the first half, but then we’ll go on one of those runs,” says point guard Tim Hausfeld. “There’s just a sense of urgency on the court, and you can tell that they’re getting tired.”

The Hilltoppers were quick, but never in a hurry. Crutchfield believes in good shots more than he believes in chaotic pacing; if it takes 30 seconds to get the look they want, he’s fine with that. And so they scored off inbounds plays and they scored off ball screens and they scored in transition when they could, and toward the end they’d run the shot clock down to the final seconds and kick it out for a corner 3. At one point in the first half, they converted on one of the prettiest series of interior passes I’d seen in quite some time. Five players put up double figures, and the final was 95-77, though they might have put up 110 if they’d pushed the pace until the end. The only lulls were brought on by overzealous officiating, but for the most part it was smooth, and it was entertaining, and it made me wonder if the glitch in the system of big-time college basketball has more to do with an overarching fear than with any sort of inherent weakness.

It has become fashionable, of course, to assert that Division I college basketball is “in trouble,” that it has become so slow and staid and overcontrolled it might ultimately wither into irrelevance. Some of this is hyperbole, since there’s an obvious upside to the parity that low scoring engenders, and since the NCAA tournament is still a financial windfall, and since a team like Wisconsin, under Bo Ryan, can drag games into the 30s and still win games and fill seats. But it is impossible not to notice that *something* is happening, that the balance has been thrown off, and it is silly not to acknowledge that

the overarching trend is impacting how people view college basketball. “I’m not a guy who’s too concerned about whether the game is popular or not,” says Ken Pomeroy, who pioneered the notion of advanced college basketball statistics at [his website](#), “but it certainly hurts the perception of it.”

Here is what the numbers confirm: Overall scoring, at slightly less than 68 points per game, is at its lowest level in three decades, and possessions are growing longer and longer. The game, as a whole, is slower and less free-flowing than it used to be. There are distinct lulls, and transition baskets are more and more difficult to come by. Ask *why* this is happening, and it becomes a Rorschach test: You will hear a dozen hypotheses from a dozen different sources, ranging from the length of the shot clock² to the increased physicality on the perimeter³ to poor shot selection to the lack of competent post players to the profusion of timeouts to the NBA’s one-and-done rule to the spike in coaches’ salaries, all of which are entirely speculative, and any of which might be at least somewhat viable. At West Virginia University — the school that has not yet scheduled a game against West Liberty, even after Crutchfield drew a considerable crowd at coach Bob Huggins’s camp a couple of years ago — the Mountaineers are averaging approximately 66 points per game, a number that [Dana Holgorsen’s football team](#) eclipsed twice last season. And I know it is unfair and incongruous to compare college football and college basketball, but since they are taking place on the same campuses and being watched by many of the same people, it inevitably happens, and at this very moment the contrast could not be more stark: One is accelerating, and the other is most certainly not.

² *Almost everyone I spoke to agreed that the shot clock should be lowered to at least 30 seconds, though Pomeroy suggested that would actually decrease offensive efficiency rather than achieve the desired result.*

³ *Pomeroy thinks perimeter physicality is one of the prime culprits, and notes the central problem with even attempting to fix this: It’ll mean a profusion of foul calls that will, at least in the short term, enrage fans and slow down the game even more.*

“There are teams that gotta do what they gotta do to win,” says Duggar Baucom, whose 2006-07 Virginia Military Institute Keydets were the last Division I squad to average

100 points per game. “But I’ll be honest with you: If they’re on TV, I’ll just turn it over to FX and watch *Justified*.”

“Some offensive-minded coaches would say it’s a big issue,” says Jim Molinari. “I just don’t get caught up in it. Defense might teach greater life lessons, anyway.”

Of the 347 teams in Division I, Molinari’s Western Illinois Leathernecks are the slowest; they average fewer than 60 possessions per game, nearly two fewer than any other team. He’s always been defensive-minded, as the coach at Northern Illinois and then at Bradley (he also spent a couple of seasons as an NBA scout), and he’s come to believe this is the best way to win at a program like Western Illinois, which has little tradition and is set in a rural pocket of the Midwest. Over the course of a season, players get worn down, and they get tired, and they get hurt; it is easier, he tells me, for the Leathernecks to play the kind of pack defense that coaches like Tom Thibodeau have successfully implemented in the NBA. You may not get steals, and you may not get transition baskets, but for a vast number of hardscrabble mid-major Division I basketball teams, Molinari says, slowing the game down is the best formula for victory. Even if it is objectively duller.

“I don’t think you can really worry about it,” he tells me. “To the fans, it doesn’t matter how many you score, as long as each team gets a few dunks.”

And so the Leathernecks have won games by scores of 50-42 and 43-40 and 39-35, and their leading scorer is averaging fewer than 13 points per game, and after a 49-36 win over North Dakota State last Thursday night,⁴ they stood at 19-5 and atop the Summit League standings, which I suppose is the only thing that matters to a coach who would (quite understandably) prefer to retain his job rather than challenge the status quo.

⁴ *Fast-break points: Western Illinois 2, North Dakota State 4.*

If there is an overarching theme to the manifesto rattling around in Jim Crutchfield’s skull, it’s that college basketball coaches are creatures of habit, and these habits trickle down to the players. He lamented the way kids roll the ball inbound without touching it in order to save seconds in late-game situations: All that does, he says, is allows the opponent to pick up its defense farther downcourt than it otherwise might have. He doesn’t understand why more coaches don’t play two-for-one with the shot clock at, say,

the 48-second mark late in the half; at one point in our conversation, he fell into an extended rant about coaches insisting that players dribble the ball directly in front of the bench before they call a timeout.

“You ask a coach, ‘Why are they doing that?’” he says. “And they say, ‘That’s what I do.’ There are a lot of other places I’d rather take the ball out of bounds than in front of my bench. If I were going to call timeout, I’d tell a guy to do it in a different place.”

But then, Crutchfield doesn’t call many timeouts at all, if he can help it; he figures there are enough breaks in the action already, especially once you get into televised games amid the NCAA tournament (during the game I watched, he didn’t call any). Sometimes he’ll call a full timeout just so he can burn through the media break at an opportune time,⁵ and the referees will credit him with a 30-second timeout in order to save his full timeouts, and he’ll insist to the official that he doesn’t want to do it that way, that he’d prefer to save his 30s for later in the game so he doesn’t disrupt the flow. Which means he occasionally finds himself in the uncomfortable position of arguing with a referee who thinks he’s done him a favor.

⁵ Division II has two mandated media timeouts in both halves even if there might not be any media covering the game. “They feel like they have to do it because everybody else does it,” Crutchfield says.

“I’ve never read a basketball book in my life,” he says. “Maybe I should, but whatever we do is homegrown here. I used to teach a coaching class, and I’d always say, ‘Don’t do it unless you can rationalize why you’re doing it.’”

He still considers himself an outsider in this business. He is not particularly well connected (or even well known, outside his region) and he does not bother much with networking. A few years ago he got a call from an agent who asked if he could put Crutchfield’s name up for Division I openings; Crutchfield agreed, and he’s declined every job he’s been offered since. This is the state where he grew up, and this is the state where he’s always lived. At his age, he wonders if it’s too late to make the jump, anyway; at West Liberty, he essentially has his own laboratory in which to experiment.

Crutchfield was born in Clarksburg and majored in math and chemical engineering at WVU. He coached a high school golf team and planned to go to law school before he got

the job at Cameron High, in a small town near the Pennsylvania border; he became the winningest coach in the school's history before moving on to West Liberty. "I was pretty aggressive," he says. "I remember the last high school game I coached, we won 104-101. In a 32-minute game."

He didn't really model his philosophy on anyone else's; he played for a slow-paced coach in high school, and he found himself constantly arguing about tempo. The only direct influence he mentioned to me came when he watched a Providence game in the 1980s, and he noted that Rick Pitino's pressure came from random angles and sped up the game in ways the diamond-and-one press he'd been playing couldn't do. When he took over the West Liberty program, he played mostly matchup zone; in his first season, he went 21-10 and averaged 90.8 points per game (he also took Marshall to the wire in a 2005 exhibition, and has had trouble getting contests against D-I programs ever since). Incrementally, as his players adjusted to the system, he began to ratchet up the man-to-man pressure against teams with inferior talent (in one game, they forced 19 turnovers in the first half), and through each of the past four seasons his team has averaged over 100. This is not the all-out freneticism⁶ of Grinnell; it is more about creating opportunities and flow and breeding trust among teammates. It is, Crutchfield says, about calculating risk versus reward, and in his mind, the rewards of an up-tempo system can effectively mitigate the risk if you employ it smartly: Because Charleston has one of the best point guards in West Liberty's conference, they backed off the pressure when it didn't work in the first half the other night.

⁶ *And, some might say, gimmickry.*

"I don't think teams seriously look to score in transition enough," he says. "You get 20 seconds of, 'We're kind of looking to score, we're passing the ball but really not doing anything.' And then, 'OK, here we go, 12 seconds on the shot clock, here comes the high ball screen.' That's when I change the channel and look for a different game."

When Crutchfield recruits, he looks for kids who react quickly — "You can make up for a lot of quickness and speed if you react mentally," he says⁷ — and play with high intensity: If they get beat on defense and they don't D up even harder the next time down the floor, he starts to wonder if they might not fit into his system.⁸ He redshirts most of his freshmen so they can acquaint themselves with his demands (one of the

luxuries of Division II, I suppose). Hausfeld, his starting point guard, is 5-foot-7 and looks like Ollie from *Hoosiers*, if Ollie had conquered all of his insecurities: I saw him go 1-on-3 in the backcourt and break pressure without even thinking of burning a timeout, and I learned that he regularly shoots 3-pointers from 30 feet to extend the defense — with his coach’s blessing, because he made 45 percent from beyond the arc last season.

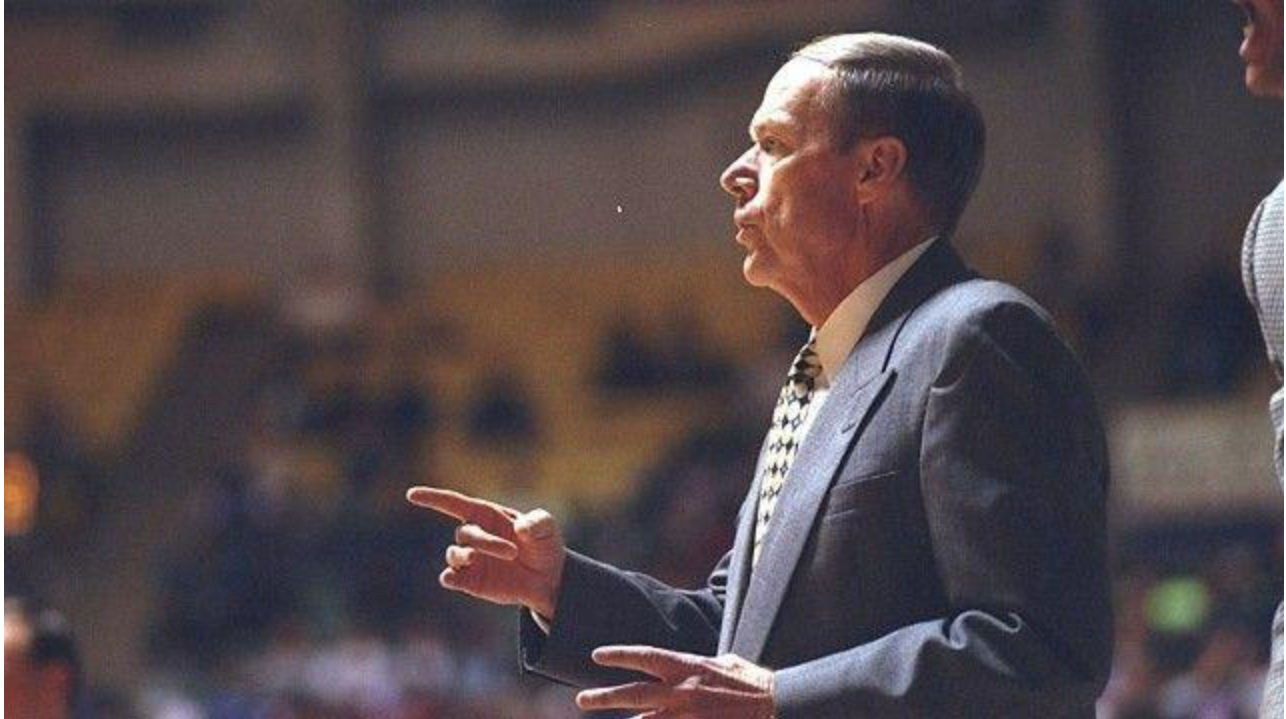
⁷ Before the season, Crutchfield calculated just how far behind someone would be at the other end of the floor if he raced downcourt in transition a half-second late (15 feet) and a third of a second late (10 feet). “We brainwash them,” he says. “We say, ‘Know the difference between sprinting and running.’”

⁸ Crutchfield’s no. 1 rule of defense, as posted in the locker room: “A strong desire to keep your opponent from scoring.”

Sometimes in practice, Crutchfield will solicit suggestions for drills to run;⁹ even though he already knows what he’s going to do, it gives his players the impression that their opinion matters, and helps them realize that once they *do* get on the floor, the game is essentially in their hands.

⁹ A practice he jokingly refers to as “Tim’s Circle of Trust,” after Hausfeld.

“I’ve never had a coach who gives his players so much freedom,” says Chris Morrow, who at 6-6 is the team’s tallest starter. “There’s a bunch of risk in giving a lot of college guys freedom to make decisions. But as players, we completely buy into it. We don’t let people get away with slacking off.”



I should pause here to note that I consider myself something of an aficionado of staid and methodical college basketball: For the past three decades, I have witnessed a myriad of Penn State teams distort the tempo to compete in a sport at which they seem doomed to perpetual mediocrity. I have seen them overachieve by lulling opponents into a false sense of security — I have apologized profusely and repeatedly for this game in particular¹⁰ — but I have also seen them brush up against absolute truth, as was the case on December 1, 1987, in State College, Pennsylvania. The final score was 93-59, and I vaguely remember the home fans booing the opponent out of the gym for unsportsmanlike practices. But I imagine it could have been far worse, because that Oklahoma team came one half and one Danny Manning short of winning the national championship, and because Billy Tubbs was their coach, and — perhaps more than any other coach of his era — Billy Tubbs actively did not give much of a shit about hurting anyone’s feelings.

¹⁰. Duggar Baucom of VMI told me proudly of the time in 2006 when he lured a Penn State team averaging in the mid-60s into a 129-111 game. Baucom’s team lost, “but it was way more entertaining for our kids.”

“Coaches are of a conservative nature, period,” Tubbs tells me when I reach him at his home in Texas. “I’m a very conservative person, except on the basketball floor, and I’m a

damn riverboat gambler on it. I'm impatient. I want to score. If guys can't shoot the ball, I don't want 'em. I put people on the floor that could shoot. We used to say up front we were going to kick your ass. But if I'd been making \$4 million a year, shit, I'd probably be conservative, too."

Close games made Tubbs uncomfortable, and so he avoided them the best way he knew how: That '87-'88 Oklahoma team averaged 104.8 points per game, and they did not spare the weak: They put up 152 on Centenary and 151 on Dayton and 144 on Oral Roberts. They had more talent than anyone, and they *acted* like it — Stacey King and Harvey Grant both averaged more than 20, and Mookie Blaylock (yes, *that* Mookie Blaylock) and Ricky Grace and Dave Sieger all put up double figures as well. Their average possession lasted roughly seven seconds; the offense was made up of options rather than specific play calls, and every pass within those options had a potential shot attached to it. They were tied at 50 with Kansas at halftime of the '88 NCAA championship game, and then the Jayhawks slowed the pace and spread the floor. Oklahoma backed off its press and lost, 83-79.

Toward the end of his Oklahoma tenure, Tubbs says, he could feel the culture changing, veering toward the conservatism he both embraces outside of the game and despises within it. (In 1991, a few years before Tubbs left Oklahoma for TCU, overall scoring peaked at 77 points per game, and it's been trailing downward ever since.) Tubbs brought up the shadow of "political correctness" with me several times, which seems like a bit of an oblique connection, but I think what he was trying to say is that the coaches who *should* be willing to gamble — coaches, like Tubbs, who are blessed with superior talent — simply don't think it's worth the risk anymore. And so they take command of everything that's happening on the floor. They slow the game down to call offensive sets, and they play it safe on defense rather than risk giving up easy layups in transition. And the very notion of running wild like Tubbs's teams did, or of throwing caution to the wind like Paul Westhead's Loyola-Marymount teams did, or of raising hell like Nolan Richardson's Arkansas teams did, becomes a concept too fraught with potential danger to even consider implementing. The favorites now play at the underdog's pace. And this, one coach told me, is how a team like Kansas loses to an obvious inferior like TCU.

"When you're watching games now, just watch how they catch the ball in scoring positions and don't even *think* about shooting it because they're trying to get it to another option," Tubbs says. "When I coached, you put five players on the floor who

could score, and you never played them out of position. Wayman Tisdale never caught the ball more than 15 feet from the basket.

“The thing you’ve got to look at is if the stands are empty in the arena. I’m seeing a lot of empty seats. You can play really conservative if you fill the gym. At Wisconsin, they don’t know any better, do they?”

Recently, Crutchfield took a call from Duggar Baucom, the coach at Virginia Military Institute; they’d been comparing notes for a while, and Baucom said he was going to drive up from his campus that night to watch West Liberty. “That’s, like, five hours,” Crutchfield said. “Don’t bother. I’ll send you the tape.”

“I’ve seen the tape,” Baucom said. “I want to see it live.”

So he did, and they spent a couple days together, talking basketball, about ways to buck the trends. For Baucom, the challenges of recruiting Division I talent to a military academy are virtually insurmountable — he’s essentially working with D-II talent — but his teams have always been at least passable and have made it to the finals of the Big South conference tournament three times. During the 2006-07 season, his team averaged 100.9 points (first in the country) and gave up 98.2 (last in the country).

“Coaches are a lot more control freaks than they’ve ever been,” says Baucom, which is not a complaint you hear very often from a coach at a school that claims to foster “punctuality, order, discipline, courtesy, and respect for authority.”

“I call ‘em joystick coaches,” Baucom tells me. “They try to orchestrate every movement instead of letting ‘em play. It becomes kind of like a wrestling match. There’s teams in our league that run 20 seconds of false motion to get the shot clock down, and then run a set. I watch some teams play and it looks like the kids are in jail.”

There are exceptions: Several coaches told me they’ve enjoyed watching Indiana and Michigan’s balanced offenses this season, and that Roy Williams is still attempting to push the tempo with a flawed North Carolina squad that’s in the top 10 in Pomeroy’s adjusted tempo rating. (Northwestern State also leads the country in adjusted tempo and is near the top of the Southland Conference.) But the game keeps trending slower, and even those teams that want to run are limited by their opponents’ prolonged possessions. The transition game is such a non-factor that Crutchfield sometimes

watches TV and sees players jogging back downcourt with their backs turned. There are no such lapses permitted in his system: During the Charleston game, the Hilltoppers got an easy basket after a referee reversed an out-of-bounds call; amid the confusion, Charleston didn't set its defense, and a West Liberty player was wide-open under the hoop.

I don't think anyone really knows where big-time college basketball goes from here. I don't know if there will be enough of a groundswell to alter the rules or the one-and-done phenomenon or to futz with the shot clock or to even engage in a thorough discussion of whether this degeneration in scoring is even the primary problem that needs solving. There is a reflexive tendency to ascribe any sort of trend in sports to modernity, to a fundamental change in the character of youth — which is exactly what happened when Tubbs and Westhead were running it up two decades ago — but there's also a little bit of false advertising from the establishment at play here: No coach (other than perhaps Bo Ryan) can win recruits by promising to play a more boring style than the year before; they all *say* they want to pick up the pace.¹¹ And yet it never happens. And it will take a series of risky decisions to make it change.

¹¹ *Here is a story from 2009 about newly hired Virginia coach Tony Bennett, a Bo Ryan protégé, insisting that he plans to play faster. "There is a stereotype," Bennett told Andy Katz. As I write this, his team is ranked 341st out of 347 teams in adjusted tempo this season.*

"I've not had one recruit come in and say, 'I'm more of a slow-down kind of guy,'" says Crutchfield, who still believes that it's worth the gamble if you know how to play the odds, who still believes that college basketball players will more readily adapt to a team-oriented system if it permits them the freedom to make their own decisions. As if to prove his point, he tells me about a game a few years ago when one of the opposing teams in his conference tried to slow things to a glacial pace, milking the shot clock to its expiration date on every possession. And in the middle of this, the opposing point guard dribbled over to the West Liberty bench, straight at Crutchfield.

"Coach," he said. "This sucks."