Darcie Vincent is a proven winner.

Her competitive juices have produced 321 wins, a national championship at the Division II level and she's restored Appalachian State's winning tradition in just three short years. Vincent, who came within mere moments of leading ASU to its first NCAA tournament appearance in 12 years, has produced a school-record 25 wins and a regular-season championship in the Southern Conference.

And despite a heartbreaking loss to Samford in the SoCon tournament championship game, the Mountaineers have earned an automatic berth in the Women's National Invitational Tournament. It's a justifiable reward for a coach that has the midas touch.

"Playing in the (Women's Basketball Invitational Tournament) last season, really prepared us for this season," said sophomore Kelsey Sharkey, who was named the SoCon Student-Athlete of the Week on Wednesday. "It got us ready for tournament play this season. And for being as young as we are, we're playing like a veteran group."

Vincent instilled a winning attitude in her team following a nine-win campaign in her first year at the helm. But her biggest challenge came on the recruiting trail, making believers out of those who doubted ASU would ever return to its winning ways.

"We had people actually chase us out of the gym," she said. "It was tough in the beginning. A lot of high school coaches just didn't show us any respect. And a lot of players were skeptical about coming here."

But despite those obstacles, Vincent kept knocking on the door like an ambitious salesman, not willing to take no for an answer. And her persistence has finally paid off. In turn, the Mountaineers have been huge benefactors.

The Mountaineers finally made believers of their critics last season. They made a 14-game turnaround by producing 23 wins. They followed that up by winning the WBI tournament; and they did it against Memphis, a Conference USA team.

They took it a step further this season by winning a school-record 25 games, and earning a an automatic berth in the WNIT.

"This is still a young group," said Vincent, who has led the Mountaineers to 57 wins in two-plus seasons. "There still sophomores, but they're an aggressive group and they believe in our system. They want to be the ones to turn this program around."

And this current group, led by Anna Freeman, Ashlen Dewart, Courtney Freeman and Chakeitha Weldon have brought a winning attitude to a program that produced just one winning season during a 12-year stretch.

And the Mountaineers were a dominate 21-2 when leading at halftime this season. Unfortunately, the magic ran out against the Bulldogs in Monday's SoCon title game. But despite the loss, Vincent wasn't discouraged.

"You have to play in games like this to learn how to win them," she said, following Monday's loss. "Sometimes we forget just how young this team really is. But in a short time, they've come a long way."

And now it's off to the WNIT. The pairings will be announced Monday. It's not the NCAA tournament, but as the old cliche goes, the journey of a 1,000 miles begins with the first step.

And the journey, which is far from finished, is slowly building into a joy ride for a program once considered an after thought.

Attendance is up, and the Mountaineers have elbowed their way to the top. They were a combined 5-1 against the league heavyweights----chattanooga and Samford. They also produced the program's first conference title since 1996. And there's still a lot of basketball left to play, according to Vincent.

"We still have a chance to extend this season to two or three more games," she said. "This team still wants to play basketball. We're not ready to end the season just yet."

And neither are we.