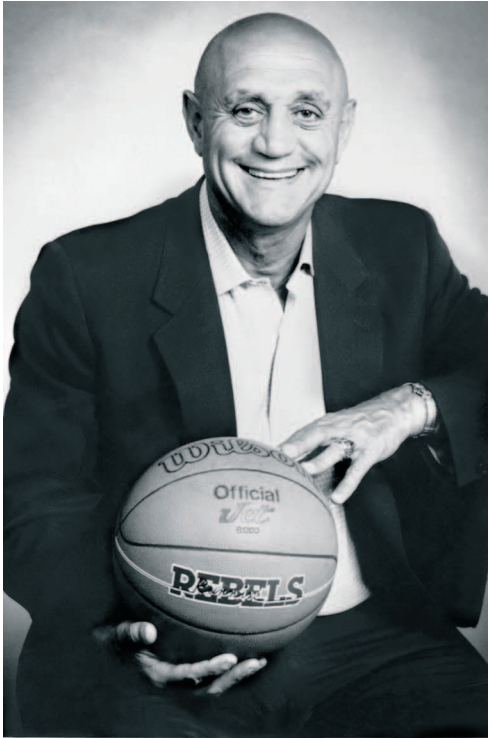


BASKETBALL'S ARMENIAN REBEL

The story of basketball icon Jerry Tarkanian cannot be told without also speaking of his Armenian heritage.

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RUNNIN' REBEL
HEAD COACH JERRY TARKANIAN



In 1977, college basketball icon, Jerry Tarkanian, came to the proverbial fork in the road when the Los Angeles Lakers offered him the team's head coaching job. For an Armenian-American who spent his adolescence just up the freeway in Pasadena, seven years in the Los Angeles Community College District's coaching ranks and an unprecedented run with California State University, Long Beach, the honor of coaching the city's premier franchise could have been the defining pinnacle of a career. When I asked Tarkanian this very question, he said, "It was certainly one of the toughest decisions I've ever made in my life," as he recounted the day he declined the chance of coaching the pre-Showtime Lakers after having committed verbally. So how does a man like Tarkanian, who was steering the ship with the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV Rebels) and executing decisions effortlessly on the hardwood come to the verdict of refusing one of the most prestigious honors a coach can ask for — twice? "Loyalty," he said, a trait that Tarkanian credits to his Armenian roots. "Through the years, I've realized that the most loyal people are your Armenian people," Tarkanian said as he spoke from the same city he chose almost 32 years later. "I had a strong loyalty with the Las Vegas people because they stood by me. I always tried to be a good person and a good coach and I worked real hard at it." The loyalty he talks about kicked in two years later when the newly-minted owner of the LA Lakers, Jerry Buss, offered Tarkanian the coaching job yet again, along with a point guard they had just drafted by the name of Magic Johnson to compliment Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. After receiving a two hundred thousand dollar a year offer, which was virtually unheard of at the time, Tarkanian was close to accepting the deal and braving the next venture in his professional basketball career. However, the final and decisive straw was drawn when Vic Weiss, his longtime

Dossier:

Born August 30, 1930, Jerry Tarkanian is best known for his coaching success during his tenure for college basketball's UNLV Rebels. In 19 years at the helm, he compiled 509 victories, including the national championship in 1990, the only title in school history. Unfortunately, his battles with the NCAA are always a footnote on his resume as he was forced to resign from UNLV in 1992 for a series of events. He was given the nickname "Tark the Shark" by a Los Angeles-based sports writer. He developed his well-known and superstitious habit of biting on a towel one day while coaching for Redlands High School in 1960. The gym was so hot, he drenched his towel with water and sucked on it for hydration instead of going back and forth to the fountain. After winning the league championship, he never dropped the habit.

friend and acting agent, was found in the trunk of his own Rolls-Royce murdered; an incident that the LAPD would later call an organized crime hit. And with that, a devastated Tarkanian passed on "Showtime" and the road of purple and gold and proceeded to be a "Runnin' Rebel," a place where 509 wins, four Final Four appearances and the 1990 NCAA championship later, he would etch his name into college basketball history and, as has been well documented — controversy.

THE ARMENIAN ROOTS

As the 79 year-old Tarkanian sat in his Las Vegas home recovering from a recent spinal surgery, he reminisced not only his action-packed basketball career, but his Armenian heritage, his first trip to Armenia and all of his dedicated Armenian fans, as well. ▶

“I have always been very proud to say that I am Armenian,” acknowledged the man who was born and raised in Euclid, Ohio until the age of 14 by his Armenian parents. Four years ago, Jerry joined his son George and his family along with a church group from Fresno for a 16-day trek to Yerevan featuring a heavy dose of sightseeing of the country’s most significant landmarks. His trip included visits to Echmiadzin, Khor Virap, Gyumri and Lake Sevan, among others, but the most touching was his visit to the Armenian Genocide Memorial, Tarkanian said. It was at the museum in Yerevan where he saw where his mother Haigouhie was raised, Malatia, before she and her brother escaped to Lebanon because of the massacres. “That was very moving for him,” Mary-Kay Tarkanian, Jerry’s daughter-in-law, said. “It was really an important stop for him and all of us to see all of the different parts of the museum and understand the history of the people.” When

Tarkanian witnessed areas of the country that were still ravaged by the earthquake of 1988, he somberly said, “It was very heartbreaking to see that. It was tough. All in all though, it was great to see Armenia.” Although Jerry had never been to Armenia until 2005, he always lived and made headlines amongst his compatriots, whether it was in Los Angeles, Las Vegas or Fresno, a city with dense Armenian population. “I stay involved with Armenians of Fresno to this day,” he said, noting that when he retreats to Fresno, his fix for feasting on everything Armenian is satisfied. “I love Armenian food. All of it,” he said, mentioning various lamb dishes. It was at Fresno State where Tarkanian played collegiate basketball for the Bulldogs until 1955 — the same school where he met his wife Lois and 40 years later, revamped the basketball program when he was signed for the head coaching position in 1995. Undoubtedly, he was welcomed with



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open arms by the faithful Armenian supporters. “My Armenian fans have been wonderful,” he said as he reflected back on all the years and countless occasions when they were at his side. “They have supported me in every way they could and they’ve been a real inspiration to me.”

SLEEPLESS IN LAS VEGAS

Before coaching at Fresno State, the boisterous and affably nicknamed “Tark the Shark” was at UNLV, a place where the entire sports and Armenian world got to know the towel-biting Jerry Tarkanian on a broader stage, one known for abundant achievement and inconsiderable controversy related to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Although he compiled an impressive 509-105 record in a 19-year stretch that included a run capped off with UNLV beating Duke to win the national title and going 34-0 the next season before losing the championship game, his success could not hold off the NCAA’s scrutiny outside the court as he was met with constant criticism for recruiting violations. Always watched under a microscope, Tarkanian’s undoing came after three players from his 1990 championship team were photographed in a hot tub with a convicted sports fixer who was suspected of having ties with the mafia. Although Tark had amassed the highest Division I winning percentage of all time, the Shark was forced to resign.



There are schools and streets named after him. Tarkanian Way is just across from the home arena for UNLV, and Jerry Tarkanian Way is located on the West side of the city of Las Vegas.

Tarkanian would eventually go on to sue the NCAA for harassment and settle for \$2.5 million. When asked if the NCAA had a personal vendetta against him, he replied, “There is no question about it. It was just a battle with them. They were unjust and wrong, but in the end, they were never once able to get anything against me that was a major violation against my program.” Shortly after his resignation from UNLV, Tarkanian came full circle and capitalized on a call that was first made 15 years earlier — he accepted a job coaching in the NBA, although it wasn’t for the Lakers. After accepting a three-year offer from the San Antonio Spurs in 1992, Tarkanian’s career in basketball proved to be short lived as just 20 games into the season, he was dismissed from his coaching duties. Disagreements with the ownership regarding the team’s personnel along with difficulties acclimating to the professional style of play proved to be his undoing. Tarkanian said he always believed he would have done a better job had he been presented with the opportunity.

Although his marriage with UNLV ended sourly despite the loyalty he showed to the city and university over the span of 20 years, Tarkanian still calls Las Vegas home and the family surname is as prominent as ever. His wife currently holds a seat on the Las Vegas City Council, their son Danny announced his candidacy in August for next year’s U.S. Senate race in Nevada and their other son George and his wife Mary-Kay are manning the Tarkanian Basketball Academy located just off the strip. There are even schools and streets named after him. Tarkanian Way is just across from the Thomas & Mack Center — the home arena for UNLV, and Jerry Tarkanian Way is located on the West side of the city. He and his wife also have a school named in their honor, the Lois & Jerry Tarkanian Middle School. With that, the Tarkanian name is just as known inside Nevadan circles for shaping up Las Vegas as Kirk Kerkorian’s is, a strange coincidence when one considers that two Armenian-Americans from Fresno found their niche and each other

to inscribe their names in the story of one of the world’s most renowned cities. But it is Vegas, where some get lucky and hit it big and others find their place and each other, which is exactly what Tarkanian and Kerkorian have done over the years. Tarkanian went as far as calling him a “really good friend.” As they shared a bond of their Fresno roots and held the limelight as Armenians making it big in Vegas, they also developed a great relationship. Although the two never conducted business with one another, that didn’t stop them from building a friendship. Nowadays, Tarkanian is often surrounded by his four children and ten grandchildren who live within a few miles of him and provide around-the-clock support and care whenever needed. Although his family, as is proper, attends to his needs, one shouldn’t forget that the bond between Las Vegas and Jerry Tarkanian is so well established, that the entire city would be waiting to render aid should he so much as scrape his finger — a fitting tribute in light of the loyalty he has shown them. ©