

Runnin'

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UNLV Rebels • A Basketball Legacy
Steve Carp

Stephens Press • Las Vegas, Nevada

Cover photo: Larry Johnson was one of the heroes of UNLV's 1990 national championship win over Duke. Johnson saves the ball from going out of bounds while eluding two would-be Duke defenders.
Photo by Jeff Scheid.

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Dedication

In loving memory of Jean and Charles Birnbaum, my two biggest fans.

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Acknowledgments

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A very special thank you goes to sports information director Andy Grossman, who provided the majority of the photos in this book and loaned me his entire collection of media guides to assist me with my research. Ditto for Rosa Guzman, the longtime sports information secretary who never failed to comply with a request for a photo, stat, or newspaper clip to ensure the accuracy of the contents within. My gratitude also goes to Dominic Clark,

the first great sports information director at UNLV, whose well-crafted book about the Rebels, *Dynasty in the Desert* served as a wonderful resource to aid me in my work.

Over the course of forty-seven years, many great experiences are lived and stories are created. The caretakers of these stories are the UNLV coaches Chub Drakulich, Ed Gregory, Rolland Todd, Jerry Tarkanian, Bill Bayno, Max Good, and Charlie Spoonhour who provided insight into the history of Rebel basketball; as did assistants Dave Rice, Jay Wright, Ron Ganulin, and Fred Albrecht. Many thanks for their candor.

My best goes to *Las Vegas Review-Journal* publisher Sherm Frederick, who approached me three years ago to write a book about UNLV's basketball program. He gave me the encouragement I needed to begin this project.

And finally, I give thanks to my family, friends, and colleagues for their support. A day hasn't gone by when someone didn't ask about my research or offer words of support. It is every writer's dream to author a book and today my dream has been realized.

Foreword

As a kid growing up in Las Vegas, the greatest athletic accomplishment you could have had would be to play basketball for the Runnin' Rebels and Jerry Tarkanian. We didn't have professional sports and not a lot of access to sports on television. There just wasn't anything even close to being a Rebel. Everyone I knew idolized the Rebels, and I was no exception.

I remember sneaking into my mom's room, draping my blanket over both me and the television so as not to wake her up (this was at midnight and typically on a school night) with the volume all the way down, and I would watch the replay of that night's game. Even then, I would dream about wearing the scarlet and gray and running the break for the Rebels.

The only time I ever saw Tarkanian back then was on television, and he seemed bigger than life. I equated him with any celebrity you'd see at the movies or on any show, and was in awe of everything that was Rebel Basketball.

The most important thing to ever happen to me as a child was when I was in the fourth grade and having problems in school. My teacher, Mr. Edgeworth, who was also my coach, told my mom that if I would focus and put forth a better effort in the classroom that I could one day play for the Rebels. To this day, I get goose bumps thinking back on his words and how it changed my life—it gave me a new sense of purpose and direction.

I carried my teacher's words with me to high school when I had started getting recruited by UNLV. Had it not been for those words and my eventual entry into the Runnin' Rebels program, I may have ended up like so many of my friends growing up in gangs, on drugs, in jail, or even worse. The blessings that I have are all because of

the opportunities that playing for the Rebels and going to UNLV provided.

When Tark actually came to my home, everyone in the neighborhood was out in the streets, and I was like a big celebrity. No one could believe that the Shark was coming to see me, a little kid from Rancho High School who was not thought of in any way of being a top-level Division 1 player.

But Coach Tark had a way of making you believe you could be a great player if you worked hard enough and followed his lead. It took awhile, but all of his words came true. Imagine, of all the great teams and players, I was the one who led his team to the national championship. I had the honor of being part of the greatest team in school history, and although I had a lot of success in the NBA and some initial success in the broadcasting world, my fondest memories are of wearing that UNLV uniform and of hearing P. A. announcer Dick Calvert say "Let's roll out the red carpet for your Runnin' Rebels."

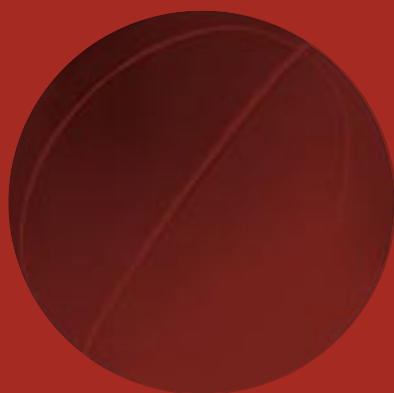
When I heard that Steve Carp was writing a book about the history of UNLV basketball, I was pleased. There's a great history to the Runnin' Rebels, and I am grateful for the small part I have played. A lot has happened in four decades, and from the very beginnings of the program right up to having fellow Las Vegan Marcus Banks being a lottery pick, Runnin' Rebel basketball has been filled with excitement.

If you're a UNLV fan, you'll get to relive all those moments in the following pages. Nothing comes close to being a Rebel, and I will be one for life.

—Greg Anthony



CHAPTER



THE IN THE BEGINNING

Back when the university was first started, Las Vegas was quite a different city than it is today. It was still a small town where virtually everyone knew each other. Gaming drove the economy exclusively, and those who started UNLV and its sports program knew they had to put an exciting basketball team on the court in order to compete with the excitement of the casinos.

In just a few years, players all over the country who didn't even know who UNLV was, much less know anything about their basketball program, wanted to play for the team. It all began in 1951, when someone had a vision of creating a university in Southern Nevada. This notion had been a long time coming, as there had been an established university up north in Reno since the 1860s, with some classes being taught in Las Vegas as an extension.

By 1955 the stirrings became reality as the Board of Regents expanded the curriculum in Southern Nevada, laying the foundation for a separate school with its own identity. With the support of the local community, the regents were able to acquire 163 acres of land bordering Maryland Parkway, just south of the Las Vegas city limits.

By June 1957, Maude Frazier Hall, the first building, was built on the campus of what was then called Nevada Southern. It was a lone structure on a large plot of land, but it was still considered home when the university

officially opened its doors with an enrollment of approximately 800 students. This upstart school appropriately took on an upstart nickname of the Rebels.

At Nevada Southern those 800 students were immediately searching for an identity. They went to Bill Carlson who was the dean, and asked if the school would be willing to start a sports team—basketball, football, baseball—it didn't matter to them. The students saw the excitement being generated from the teams at University of Nevada-Reno, and other institutions, and they wanted it for themselves.

Carlson agreed with them, and in 1958 he contacted Michael "Chub" Drakulich, an Ely native. Drakulich had graduated from the UNR a few years before and knew all about college and professional sports. He was a second baseman for the school's baseball team and had played professionally for the Reno Silver Sox. In his career as a coach, he had taken Fallon High School to the state

basketball tournament five of the six years he coached and then moved to Rancho High School in North Las Vegas where he was achieving similar success.

Drakulich was proud of his upbringing, and he loved Nevada. He also loved Las Vegas. To him, Las Vegas was the land of opportunity—a place where a person could make something of himself.

Drakulich always loved a challenge, but the notion of coaching for UNLV was a daunting one. For starters, his operating budget would be a mere \$10,000. That small sum had to pay for everything—equipment, uniforms, travel, referees; anything that the program would need had to come from that money. Secondly, his salary would not fairly match the amount of work needed to start a team from scratch, although it would be a little more than he was making at Rancho. In addition, he would have to teach three or four courses along with his coaching and accompanying administrative duties.

It was a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, and Drakulich decided to take it. Little did he realize what he was in for. “We had absolutely nothing,” Drakulich said. “We had no equipment, no uniforms, no players, no place to play, no schedule. But I was young and ambitious. I probably didn’t know any better.”

Somehow, though, it got done. Bruce Trent, who was running the Las Vegas Parks and Recreation Department at the time, offered Drakulich use of the Dula Recreation Center on Bonanza Road as a home court and a place to practice.

Then he drafted a team. The majority of the roster was comprised of local players, some of whom had played for Drakulich at Rancho and others who had played against him while at Las Vegas and Basic high schools. He even found several schools in Utah willing to play his new team, and they were willing to pay him to travel.

Drakulich would get \$200 to go to Southern Utah University in Cedar City or to Dixie College in St. George. Service ball was still popular in 1958, and a team from Nellis Air Force Base had a squad that was willing to play the college kids. So did a team from the naval station in Long Beach.

By early December, the Rebels of Nevada Southern were ready to represent their one-year old school at the Dula Center against Southern Utah. It was a competitive game and the Rebels, led by a 6-foot-2 shooting guard named Bernie Fumagalli, played against the Thunderbirds. Southern Utah prevailed 57-52. “We didn’t have a real big crowd for that first game,” Drakulich said of the inaugural contest. “We had cheerleaders and those who showed up were enthusiastic. But we lost and we lost several after that.”

The Rebels lost the first nine games before finally beating Nellis 52-47 for the first official victory in school history. They would win four more games that year, twice beating the Long Beach navy squad and twice beating the UNR freshman team.

“We had a nucleus of local kids, and they were going to stick it out,” Drakulich said of how he held things together that first year which saw Nevada Southern go 5-13. “I knew this was going to take time, and we weren’t going to be a success overnight. But I felt that as long as we kept making progress each year and kept getting better, we would be all right.”

The following year, the Rebels posted a winning record, going 13-8. Like the team, the campus was also beginning to take shape, and by 1961 the team had its own on-campus gym seating 2,000 people. “They had built an outdoor court in 1959, and we would practice on the asphalt,” Drakulich recalled. “So getting the campus gym was a huge step for us.” The team felt like it truly belonged.

Drakulich was still working with limited funds at that point, yet he was trying to upgrade the program. Each year he kept improving the schedule and as enrollment on campus grew and the team began to win more, the community became increasingly interested.

“People wanted to get involved,” Drakulich said. “We formed a booster club to raise money. People who owned restaurants gave our players meals because we didn’t have dorms. We were also able to get our players jobs, which was a thing you could do back then.”

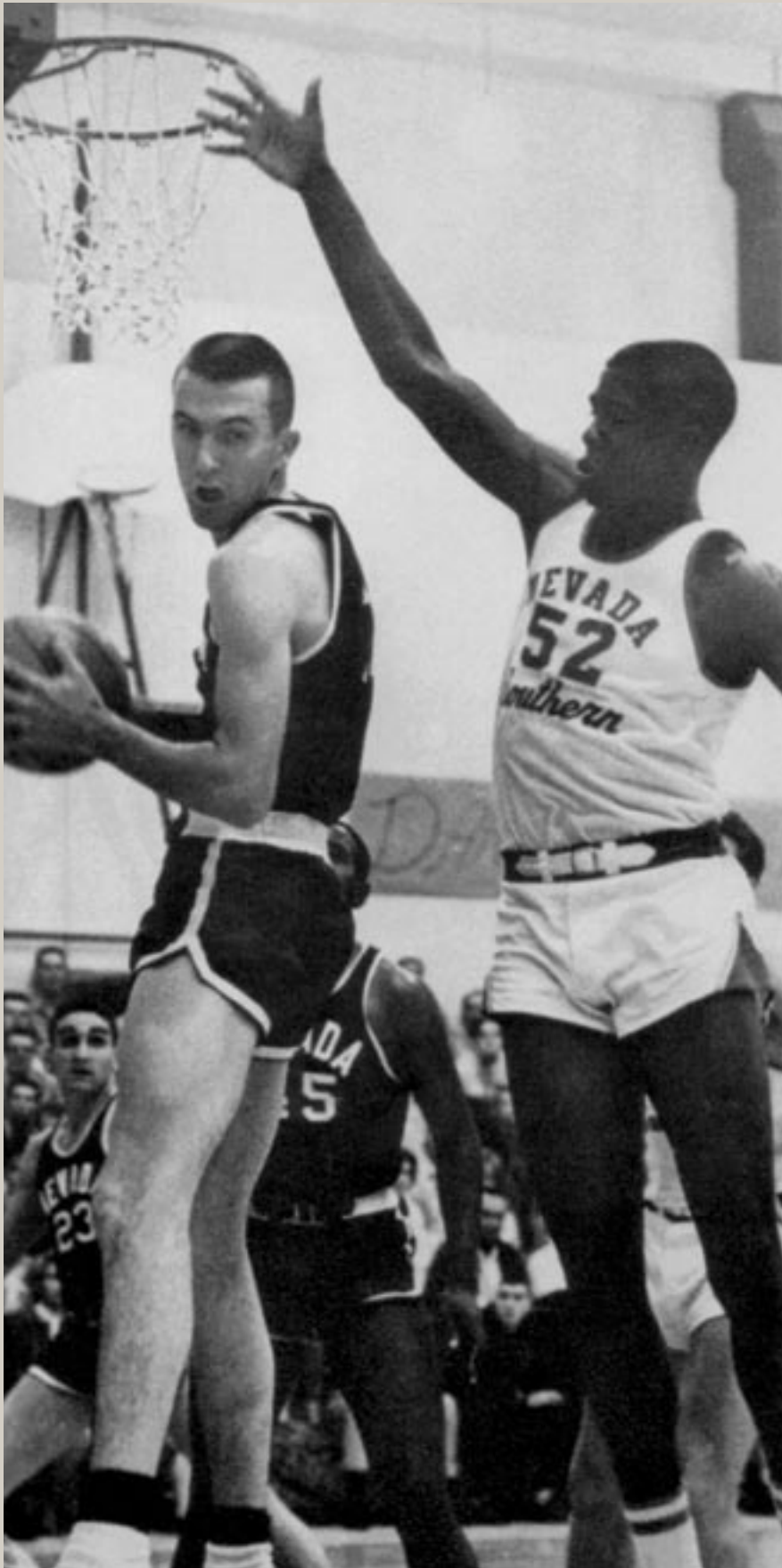
By 1962, Drakulich, who was also the athletic director, started looking at widening the scope of Rebel athletics. He began a baseball program and was looking to add golf and tennis. He also began looking for an assistant. He also was sensing that his future was more of an administrator

than as a coach and began looking for a successor. "I always felt that once I got it going, someone else would take it from there," Drakulich said. "We knew the direction we wanted to go, which was to have a program like the one up north."



Defense has always been a staple of UNLV basketball.

1



2



1 Silas Stepp, the first great Rebel, defending.
 2 Drakulich passes the torch to Brad Rothermel in 1981. 3 UNLV players have always enjoyed a close relationship with the fans. 4 Michael "Chub" Drakulich, the founding father of Rebel basketball, remained UNLV's athletic director until 1978.

4



