

Legendary coach and Fresno State Bulldog Jerry Tarkanian dies at age 84

By Marek
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- Jerry Tarkanian: By the numbers
 - **35-0**: Record at Riverside City College in 1963-64, winning state junior college title
 - **145-22**: Record at Riverside City College from 1961 to 1966 (3 state titles)
 - **67-4**: Record at Pasadena City College from 1966 to 1968 (1 state title)
 - **192-240**: Record of the five coaches over 17 years who preceded Tarkanian at Long Beach State
 - **122-20**: Tarkanian's record at Long Beach State from 1968 to 1973
 - **0**: Conference titles won by Long Beach State before Tarkanian became head basketball coach
 - **4**: Conference titles won by Tarkanian in his five years at Long Beach State
 - **7-5**: Record in NCAA Tournament at Long Beach State
 - **509**: Number of wins at UNLV
 - **105**: Number of losses at UNLV

Jerry Tarkanian, the colorful, successful and controversial Naismith Hall of Fame basketball coach and Fresno State graduate known for giving second chances to players with checkered pasts and his unyielding battle with the NCAA, died Wednesday morning. He was 84.

Mr. Tarkanian's health deteriorated during his final years, requiring numerous hospital visits. The legendary coach was taken by ambulance Monday morning from his Las Vegas home to Valley Hospital Medical Center with breathing trouble and dangerously low blood pressure. For the next two days he remained in critical condition at the hospital's intensive care unit as family members maintained a bedside vigil.

"He fought and fought and fought," his son, Danny Tarkanian, told The Associated Press. Danny Tarkanian first announced his father's passing on Twitter just before 9 a.m.: "Coach Tark, my father, the greatest man I have ever known, passed today, to take his place in heaven. I will miss him every day of my life."

Best known for his tenure at UNLV, Mr. Tarkanian's Runnin' Rebels captured the 1990 NCAA Championship and made four trips to the Final Four. At Fresno State, his final coaching stop, the Bulldogs reached the NCAA Tournament twice and recorded six straight 20-win seasons before he retired in 2002.

[ON TWITTER: Reactions to the death of Jerry Tarkanian](#)

With droopy eyes, bald head and curious habit of munching on a damp towel during games, Mr. Tarkanian cut a unique figure among the successful college basketball coaches of his era. His teams played a frenetic style, using relentless defensive pressure to fuel fast-break points.

Mr. Tarkanian's success brought him great popularity, and also controversy. An early critic of NCAA enforcement

procedures, he and the governing body of college sports waged a two-decade long legal battle that culminated with the coach winning a \$2.5 million out-of-court settlement.

The 2013 Naismith Hall of Fame inductee had been hospitalized twice previously over the last 10 months. A bout with pneumonia over the Christmas holiday required a four-week stay. He also suffered a heart attack in April, one month after traveling to Fresno to see his jersey retired at Save Mart Center. Without the excitement Mr. Tarkanian's teams generated among Bulldogs fans, it's unlikely the campus arena would've been built.

Longtime friend Harry Gaykian recalled a compassionate man who believed everyone deserved a second chance for the simple reason he had been given one himself. Mr. Tarkanian was both consumed by basketball ("I don't have any hobbies," was a common Tark refrain) and willing to share his knowledge with anyone who asked.

"I can't tell you how often I'd be with him and his cell phone would ring and it's a coach from somewhere asking him about defense," recalled Gaykian, who met Mr. Tarkanian while both were Fresno State students in the mid-1950s.

"He'd tell them, 'I can't talk about it. I'll sketch something out and mail it to you.' He was just like that. I remember one time when the national coach of Israel called.

"He was open to everyone. Never said no."

TIMELINE: The life of Jerry Tarkanian

During 38 seasons at the junior college and NCAA Division I levels, Mr. Tarkanian's teams never had a losing record. He went 784-205 at Long Beach State, UNLV and Fresno State to rank 20th in career coaching victories and top five in winning percentage. (Fifty-five of those wins, including 49 at Fresno State, were later vacated due to NCAA violations.)

Forty-two of Mr. Tarkanian's players were drafted by NBA teams, including 12 first-round selections. Three of those (Melvin Ely, Chris Jefferies, Courtney Alexander) played for him at Fresno State.

Chris Herren, a Bulldogs guard who battled drug and alcohol addiction in college and the NBA before getting sober and becoming a noted motivational speaker, reflected on Mr. Tarkanian's legacy during a recent visit to Fresno.

"I talked to him on New Year's. He couldn't say much. But I just wanted him to know that his coaching, and his legacy, for me, goes way beyond basketball. He's influenced and affected my life far more in my recovery than in basketball."

Young coach molded by years in Fresno

Jerry Tarkanian was born Aug. 8, 1930, in Euclid, Ohio, the son of Armenian immigrants who escaped from Turkey during the 1915-22 genocide in which 1.5 million people were killed by the Ottoman government.

In autobiographies, Mr. Tarkanian has described how his grandfather, Mickael Tarkhanian, a government official, was beheaded by Turkish militia after being forced to watch his oldest son beheaded. His mother, then a child, escaped a similar fate because she and a brother were sent fleeing from their village on horseback.

Years later, in Lebanon, Haighouhie Tarkhanian met George Tarkanian, a man with a surname similar to hers. The couple married and soon immigrated to the U.S. After his father's death from tuberculosis, 10-year-old Jerry found solace on the playground basketball courts of Euclid and Cleveland until his mother relocated the family to California.

"My upbringing was why I always related so well to kids from tough backgrounds or single-family homes," Mr. Tarkanian wrote. "I was always at home with city kids. I understood what it was like to be raised by one parent, to grow up poor, and have to move around and scrape to get things."

QUOTABLE: Jerry Tarkanian in his own words

After attending high school and junior college in Pasadena, Mr. Tarkanian received a basketball scholarship to Fresno State where he spent two seasons (1954-55) as a backup guard. Although he didn't play much, teammates voted him captain for his work ethic and enthusiasm. Gaykian remembers a basketball junkie who had a gift for analyzing plays that he constantly scribbled on scraps of paper.

While in college, Mr. Tarkanian met several people who would shape his life. He lived in a rowdy two-story house on Maroa Avenue with six roommates. One of them was Sid Craig, co-founder of the Jenny Craig weight loss empire. The two became lifelong friends. Mr. Tarkanian also worked as a personal aide to football coach Clark van Galder, a man he later called one of his greatest influences.

"He was an extraordinarily intense individual, and he demanded equal intensity from his players," Mr. Tarkanian wrote of van Galder. "How he got it was by becoming close with them, by forging an emotional bond."

It was Craig who set up Mr. Tarkanian with a friend of his from Kerman named Lois Huter. Friends thought it an odd match. Lois was a serious student; Jerry anything but. She resisted at first. He was tenacious.

"If it wasn't for Lois, I doubt he would've graduated," Gaykian said. "He wanted to dribble the ball and hang out with his buddies. It was Lois who told him if he wanted to be a coach he had to study and go to class."

Mr. Tarkanian began his coaching career as a fill-in at Edison High, where he directed the Tigers to the section finals. That was followed by a two-year stint at San Joaquin Memorial. During games inside those hot gyms he began sucking on wet towels — a practice that later became a trademark. Despite a 26-12 record at Memorial he was unable to land the Bullard job and left Fresno to pursue opportunities elsewhere.

Early success leads to dynasty at UNLV

After two more high school stops, Mr. Tarkanian became coach at Riverside College in 1961. He and Lois also got married. At Riverside, his teams won three consecutive California Junior College State Championships from 1964-66. At Pasadena the following year, he made it four straight.

In 1968, Mr. Tarkanian was hired by Long Beach State. He was wildly successful there, too, going 122-20 over five years, never losing a home game and making four NCAA Tournament appearances. In 1971, the underdog 49ers nearly reached the Final Four, losing 57-55 to UCLA during the height of the John Wooden dynasty.

Mr. Tarkanian was among the first college coaches to break the unwritten rule of starting no fewer than three white players. He scoured for talent from the L.A. playgrounds to Fresno (Memorial stars Roscoe and Clifton Pondexter) to Midwestern cities like Detroit and Cleveland. He also pioneered recruiting junior college players, who until then were mostly shunned by four-year schools.

"The attitude he gave us was: 'It's us against them. We're going to be the best because we need to prove something,'" Roscoe Pondexter told *The Bee* in 1995. "He did a real good job communicating that."

STILL IN THE GAME": A 2007 Fresno Bee profile of Jerry Tarkanian

Mr. Tarkanian's rapid success, as well as some of his methods, prompted suggestions Long Beach State was running a "renegade" program. Such criticisms didn't bother him. In fact, he bragged about building nationally ranked teams out of players other schools didn't want. "Tark the Shark" also wrote a local newspaper column. In one, he criticized the NCAA for putting tiny Western Kentucky on probation while ignoring "the famous" Kentucky.

"The University of Kentucky basketball program breaks more rules in a day than Western Kentucky does in a year," he wrote. "The NCAA doesn't want to take on the big boys."

Convinced he'd always be in UCLA's shadow, Mr. Tarkanian took the UNLV job in 1973. "Tumbleweed Tech," as locals called it, had little history of winning or drawing fans. That was soon to change. Meanwhile, the NCAA was still

interested in his doings at Long Beach State and placed the 49ers on probation. Soon UNLV was under its own cloud. It was the beginning of a cat-and-mouse game that would mark his 19-year tenure.

The Runnin' Rebels, as they became known, played at a fast pace and with a swarming defense that produced turnovers and transition baskets. His teams were relentless but also disciplined and focused. First with stars such as Reggie Theus and Sidney Green and later Armon Gilliam, Stacey Augmon and Larry Johnson, Mr. Tarkanian built a national powerhouse that played before capacity crowds, including a Gucci Row of celebrities like Frank Sinatra, at the newly constructed 18,500-seat Thomas & Mack Center.

"We won at UNLV because our guys played harder than anybody," Mr. Tarkanian said during a 2007 interview with The Bee. "No one played as hard as we played. And we did that because we had great pride and we were totally unselfish."

Some of UNLV's fiercest battles came against Fresno State. The Runnin' Rebels would score in triple digits against other Pacific Coast Athletic Association teams — just not against Boyd Grant's methodical Bulldogs.

From 1983 to 1986, UNLV's first year in the conference to Grant's last at Fresno State, UNLV won twice in four trips to Sells Arena while capturing four straight league titles. The Bulldogs never won at the "Shark Tank" but did manage a 51-49 victory during the 1984 PCAA tournament at the Forum in Inglewood.

"It became quite a rivalry," said Scott Barnes, a Fresno State center from 1983-85 who is now athletic director at Utah State. "Not only were they the two best programs and fan bases in the conference, you also had contrasting styles — as different as you can imagine."

Mr. Tarkanian's run peaked in 1990 when UNLV won the NCAA Championship by defeating Duke 103-73. It remains the largest margin of victory in a championship game. In 1991, with many of the same players, the Rebels went 34-0 before losing 79-77 to Duke in the national semifinals.

UNLV's problems with the NCAA were never far away. Ten different players on Mr. Tarkanian's championship team were suspended at some point during their careers. University support began to erode following a string of violations and public missteps that culminated May 26, 1991, when the Las Vegas Review-Journal published a front-page photograph of three players sharing a hot tub with a convicted sports fixer. Ten days later, the coach resigned.

Return to alma mater sparks excitement

Mr. Tarkanian had been curious about the NBA since turning down an offer from the Los Angeles Lakers in 1977. He agreed to coach the San Antonio Spurs in 1992, but that stint lasted just 20 games. He then used a \$1.3 million settlement to fund an ongoing lawsuit with the NCAA.

By 1995 Mr. Tarkanian was 64 years old, doing color commentary and a weekly radio show in Las Vegas, making movie cameos and judging suntan lotion beauty pageants.

"I was enjoying myself and never thought I'd coach again," he said.

That changed March 15 when Fresno State coach Gary Colson was forced out following his fourth losing season in five years. Mr. Tarkanian learned about the opening when a Stockton radio host called to gauge his interest and the news "hit me like a bombshell." He was interested in the position — and the community was keen in him getting it.

Mr. Tarkanian already had a speaking engagement scheduled in Fresno the following week. Then his phone started ringing. Memorial, the school where he launched his coaching career, wanted him to appear at a golf tournament. An insurance company wanted him for a luncheon. During a four-day visit, fans mobbed the popular coach everywhere he went. "Hire Tark" bumper stickers were printed. His face appeared on T-shirts. His downtown Rotary Club speech drew a larger turnout of business leaders than Ronald Reagan did when he was governor.

“The city was on fire to hire him,” Gaykian said. “I’ve never seen anything like that in Fresno before or since.”

Despite being flooded with phone calls, faxes and emails, Fresno State President John Welty still needed convincing. He was concerned with Mr. Tarkanian’s past run-ins with the NCAA. But it had been a decade since the glory days at Grant’s Tomb, and Bulldogs fans hungered for a winner. Tark’s presence, boosters reminded Welty, could also help build momentum toward a campus arena.

Fresno State officially hired Mr. Tarkanian on April 5; no other candidates were interviewed. The news conference, held at the Sid Craig School of Business, was televised live in Fresno and covered by national media. Son Danny Tarkanian, who played for his father at UNLV, came aboard as the top assistant.

“I thought it would be a great way to end up my career,” Mr. Tarkanian said in 2007. “It was my alma mater, and Danny wanted to get into coaching. I thought if I came here and won big, Danny would get the job.”

His tenure got off to a promising start. The Bulldogs went 22-11 in 1995-96 with only one player (Kendrick Brooks) added to a roster of Colson holdovers. Better things were expected in 1996-97 when four returning starters would be joined by top recruits Herren, Terrance Roberson and Daymond Forney.

Fresno State never lived up to the preseason hype. Two players were charged with assault, others were academic question marks and some had trouble meshing on the court. A four-game winning streak closed the regular season, but hopes of an NCAA berth were sunk March 6, 1997, when The Bee broke a story during the Western Athletic Conference tournament that law-enforcement officials were investigating possible point-shaving by Bulldogs players.

Point-shaving charges were never filed, despite two separate federal grand juries. Since the betting line on Fresno State games didn’t change for the game in question, Mr. Tarkanian’s friends in Las Vegas told him no point-shaving took place. Still, the story never completely went away.

Fresno State era ends in disappointment

The 1997-98 season got off to a troubling start — point guard Rafer Alston was suspended for an on-campus altercation with his girlfriend — and soon careened out of control. Herren checked himself into a Utah rehabilitation facility for drug and alcohol dependence. Alston fell asleep at the wheel and rolled his car. Forney had a warrant for his arrest. In this midst, “60 Minutes” and Mike Wallace arrived on campus for an interview.

Fresno State lost in the second round of the WAC tournament and received its third straight NIT bid. Then began a rapid sequence of events. On March 15, 1998, “60 Minutes” aired its unflattering portrayal of the program. The following night at Selland, the Bulldogs advanced in the NIT on a buzzer-beating 3-pointer. By early Tuesday morning, center Avondre Jones and guard recruit Kenny Brunner were jailed and charged with theft and assault. The victim told police he was robbed and threatened with samurai swords.

Before Fresno State flew to Hawaii for the next NIT game, Welty told the players another “disgrace” would not be tolerated. The Bulldogs won despite the turmoil and traveled to New York for the semifinals. Fresno State lost both games at Madison Square Garden, but Mr. Tarkanian won a verbal sparring match with Wallace when the two crossed paths.

“I think the real shame is that Avondre Jones and Brunner showed our story had merit only two days after it aired,” Wallace said.

Mr. Tarkanian replied: “That’s OK, Mike. We’re big on second chances. We’re even going to give you a second chance.”

In 2000, the Bulldogs finally reached the NCAAs by winning the WAC tournament at Selland. A first-round loss to Wisconsin ended that season, but Fresno State made it back the following year. Led by Melvin Ely and Chris Jefferies, the team played the fast-paced style Mr. Tarkanian was known for at UNLV. The Bulldogs beat Cal 82-70 for

their first NCAA Tournament victory since 1982 before losing to Michigan State in the second round.

Despite those successes, controversy was never far behind. By this point, Mr. Tarkanian had already won his \$2.5 million settlement from the NCAA; his attorney told him he'd never be hassled again. That changed following a March 22, 2000 story in The Bee in which the owner of a Japanese restaurant said he had given away "several thousand dollars" in free food to basketball players. The NCAA's investigation revealed athletic department officials had known about the restaurant since 1995 and never reported the violations.

After considering retirement, Mr. Tarkanian elected to return for a seventh season. It turned out to be his most frustrating one yet. Multiple player suspensions hurt team chemistry, and the coach and his supporters felt the program was being unfairly targeted by school administrators. Ely was suspended for accepting a Las Vegas hotel room he claimed he never slept in. Chris Sandy was declared academically ineligible the day before the opener and later missed six games for extra benefits. Sandy's family said they were a loan from the parish priest to pay for correspondence courses, the very ones Fresno State said he needed to be eligible.

Mr. Tarkanian stepped down March 15, 2002 following a 19-15 campaign. It was just the third time in 38 years his teams failed to reach 20 wins. Danny Tarkanian would not succeed him as coach.

"Coaching (at Fresno State) was the toughest experience I've ever had," Mr. Tarkanian wrote in 2005. "The fans here were among the best I'd been around, but we couldn't build pride. The university was always screwing with us. They would never let us win ... and 90% of it was (nonsense).

"Our program was singled out for enforcement, and that bothered me."

Hall of Fame induction brings acceptance

During Mr. Tarkanian's early retirement years, Fresno State seemed not to know what to do with the former coach. Administrators wanted his famous name involved with Save Mart Center fundraising while seeking to distance themselves from the NCAA sanctions and negative publicity that remained from his tenure.

When the campus arena opened in 2003 it did so without any mention of Mr. Tarkanian. (Even though Welty previously called it, "The House that Tark Built.") The following year, ignoring public sentiment to place his name on the SMC court, Fresno State dedicated the arena's basketball wing in his honor. To supporters, it was almost an insult since the plaque hangs in a hallway where fans aren't allowed.

Nationally, Mr. Tarkanian's popularity never waned. Gaykian recalled accompanying his longtime friend to Dallas for the Texas-Oklahoma football game and hearing him receive a louder welcome during a banquet than the governor of Texas.

"When they said, 'We'd like to introduce our special guest: Coach Jerry Tarkanian,' 400 people stood up and cheered," Gaykian said. "They gave him a standing ovation. We were just looking at each other, you know? That's just the way it was. People loved him.

"He couldn't get through an airport without stopping four times for pictures with people. He was friendly with everybody. It didn't matter who you were."

As the years passed, Mr. Tarkanian's constant battles with the NCAA (he always said "N-C-two-A") began to be viewed in a different light. He was seen as a maverick fighting against an establishment that employed its own dubious methods.

Although Mr. Tarkanian technically lost his 1988 due process case against the NCAA, by a 5-4 Supreme Court decision, the negative publicity was so great the governing body of college sports was compelled to change its enforcement rules. Because of him, investigators are not allowed to build cases without sharing information with the school. They can no longer submit hearsay evidence. An appellate court now reviews decisions on penalties.

“I’ve had several people come up to me who said they studied my case in law school, and how their professors told them it was one of the worst decisions the Supreme Court ever made,” Tarkanian said in 2007. “I should’ve won that case hands down.”

That Mr. Tarkanian had a Hall of Fame-worthy coaching résumé was never in question. He won nearly 80% of his games and took three schools to the NCAA Tournament. However, induction eluded him, no doubt due to the controversy that followed his entire career.

The call from the Naismith Hall of Fame finally came during the 2013 Final Four. Despite a health scare, Mr. Tarkanian was able to attend the induction ceremony in Springfield, Massachusetts.

After Lois Tarkanian read a taped acceptance speech on her husband’s behalf, the 83-year-old coach added a few comments in his weak voice:

“I have loved the game of basketball since my earliest memories. Basketball has been good to me. I’ve been able to be comrades with some fine individuals in the coaching profession. Sure we can be fiery and competitive, even argumentative, but we all loved the game. That special game of basketball. Deep down, we’ll ... understand the other. Thank you for your friendship. Finally, thank you, Hall of Fame, for giving me a special honor. It means so much to me, to our players, fans, coaches and staff. We are part of you. That makes us very happy and very proud.”

Gaykian said the honor meant a great deal to Mr. Tarkanian: “That was big for him — it was a feeling that he’d finally been accepted.”

Likewise, Mr. Tarkanian’s relationship with Fresno State improved markedly in his final years.

When the Bulldogs played USC in the 2013 Las Vegas Bowl, Mr. Tarkanian watched the football game as a special guest of university President Joseph Castro. In March 2014, the former coach made his final appearance at Fresno State for a ceremony retiring his jersey. During halftime, an SMC crowd of 14,800, the arena’s largest basketball turnout in seven years, erupted in cheers as family members escorted him to center court.

Mr. Tarkanian was too frail to speak but smiled when a white Bulldogs jersey bearing his name and the No. 2 was unfurled high above the north side of the arena. As the legendary coach slowly left the floor on his walker, thousands chanted, “Jer-ry! Jer-ry! Jer-ry!”

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