

VEGAS

seven

March 18-24, 2010

THIS WEEK IN YOUR CITY



The Run to Glory

WHEN THE REBELS—AND THEIR CITY—SHOT TO NO. 1

BY GREG BLAKE MILLER

FREE



Coach Tarkanian and team during their crowning moment in Denver.

"You can call us bad guys.
You can call us thugs. You can
call us hoodlums. But, please,
at the end of that, just put
'national champions.'"

— *Larry Johnson, April 2, 1990*

The Rebel Alliance

A city, a team and a dream
of 'electric togetherness'

By Greg Blake Miller

Anderson Hunt dropped 36 points on the Soviet National Team. Gorbachev did not intervene. The Berlin Wall fell. Maybe it's age: The newsreel of that autumn is full of strange jump-cuts and garbled headlines and conspiracy theories from the pages of Lewis Carroll. It is, of course, *unlikely* that the Soviet team's visit to America's most American city ended the Cold War. But theories of public diplomacy and the butterfly effect leave the possibility open. The game took place on Nov. 7, 1989, the 72nd anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas men's basketball team won, 107-102. That was on a Tuesday. By Thursday a host of happy hooligans had scaled the wall and started chipping at the concrete.

I was in California, 19 years old, studying to become an expert on the Communist Bloc. My Cold War career was going up in smoke, but it was worth it: A thousand bitter disappointments, it turned out, could be cashed in for one great triumph. I thought it was the most optimistic autumn since 1945, and when I visited my hometown of Las Vegas everyone seemed to agree with me. All I had to do was talk basketball.

Larry Johnson. Stacey Augmon. Greg Anthony. Walk into a room. Say the names. Everyone smiles at you. That's Las Vegas in November of '89, when the adventure began. For 15 years Las Vegas had made the UNLV basketball team the avatar of their civic hopes. We were experts in the peculiar American logic of urban legitimacy: *We're a real city. Look at our team.* But the national voices kept harping on Tark's sharkiness and calling our team "*NeVAHdah*-Las Vegas." We protested, to no avail, that neither the mispronunciation nor the hyphenation was really necessary. After two agonizing Final Four losses ('77 and '87) and a decade-and-a-half hovering in or around the top 20, we all understood that nothing but an NCAA title would liberate us from a national press that insisted on using gambling metaphors when discussing David Rice's haircut. We wanted to climb a wall and shout to the world that we were not hooligans after all.

Las Vegas felt young that year. We were the raw kid conquering gawkiness, the one fighting for full possession of his gifts. Steve Wynn opened his Mirage just as the basketball season began. The stagnant days of seedy '70s "carpet joints" were fading. The words "world class" may ring oddly hollow 20 years and a Great Recession later, but back then they were a badge of self-determination for Vegas Nation. We were not a tourist town but a world-class city that happened to put on a hell of a show for tourists.

The Rebels, though, were *our* show.

The revolution had begun.

For a moment, it seemed like it would last forever.

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Six minutes and 19 seconds into a game on Feb. 12, 1990, Anthony, who held the dual posts of point guard and spiritual leader for the 19-4 Rebels, collided with Fresno State guard Wilbert Hooker. Anthony then fell face first on the hardwood. His jaw broke in two places. Stacey Cvijanovich, a steady senior reserve, entered the game and promptly separated his shoulder. The Rebels, who had scored 100 points in five of their last six games, held on to beat the Bulldogs, 69-64. That night, doctors wired Anthony's jaw shut.

Three nights later, New Mexico State, which was 20-2 and had earlier beaten the Rebels, 83-82, in Las Cruces, arrived at the Thomas & Mack Center to play a Rebel team that, to all appearances, no longer had a point guard. Fireworks burst beneath the Shark Tank rafters.

Spotlights roamed the sellout crowd. Veteran public address announcer Dick Calvert announced the starting lineup: *At point guard, a 6-2 junior from Las Vegas, Nevada...*

Anthony had 10 points, six assists and two rebounds that night. The Rebels won, 109-86. In a single feat of blood-curdling pain-management, the hometown kid had become, as longtime fan Larry Gabriel puts it, "the ambassador for the team, the university and the city."

"It felt like we beat New Mexico State by 100 points," says Rice, a reserve guard on the team who later spent 11 seasons as a UNLV assistant coach. "[After the injury] we were wondering, where do we stand with Greg? And he shows up for practice the next day with a helmet on. We had a really good team before that, but that statement by Greg was, *Here we go!* Nothing would stop us. We'd overachieve."

The next week brought impressive victories over Arizona and Louisville. By the end of February, though, after 11 games in 26 days, the team was exhausted. David Butler had twisted his knee in the Fresno State game. Cvijanovich was still working his shoulder into form. Travis Bice had chicken pox. Chris Jeter had mono. Anthony was eating through a straw. After a loss at UC Santa Barbara, the Rebels escaped Utah State—where a water bomb exploded under the UNLV bench and drenched Tarkanian—with an 84-82 win. Suddenly the Rebels seemed vulnerable. But that was before they traveled to Long Beach Arena, scored 306

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points in three days, outscored their opponents by 67 and won the Big West Tournament.

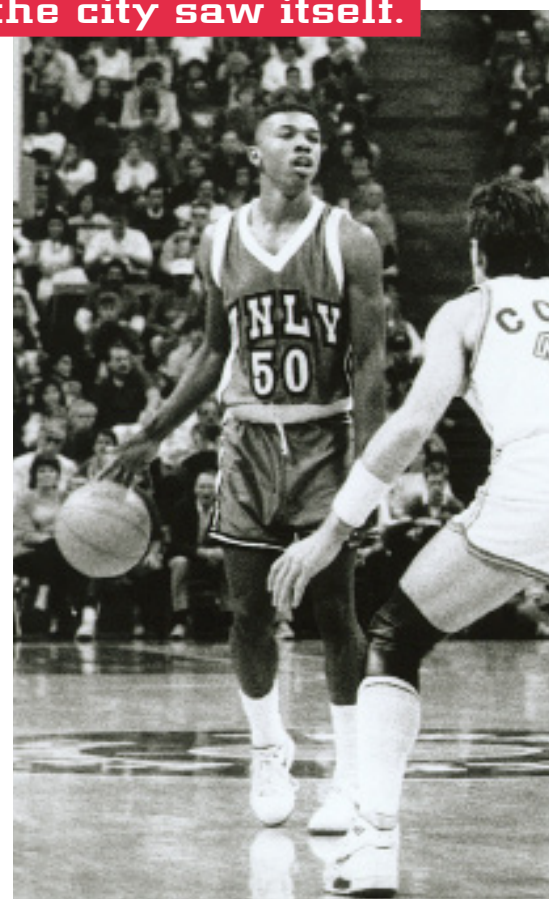
As the top seed in the NCAA Tournament's West Region, the Rebels crushed Arkansas-Little Rock in the first round, defeated Ohio State in a workmanlike performance in the second, and then nearly tripped over Ball State, securing a 69-67 win when the Cardinals turned the ball over at the buzzer.

Then came the regional final against Loyola Marymount, a squad riding an extraordinary wave of grief and inspiration following the death of star center Hank Gathers. Before the game, two revered Las Vegas gave pep talks to the Rebels. One was Steve Wynn; the other was Greg Anthony. "They are living a dream," Anthony said of the Cinderella-story Lions. "It's time someone woke them up."

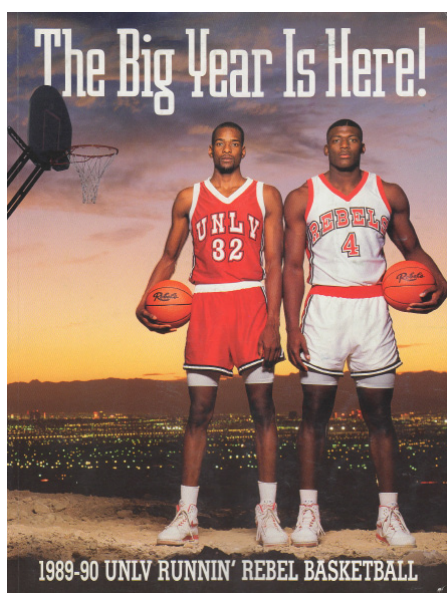
The Rebels won, 131-101, and they were on their way to their third Final Four.

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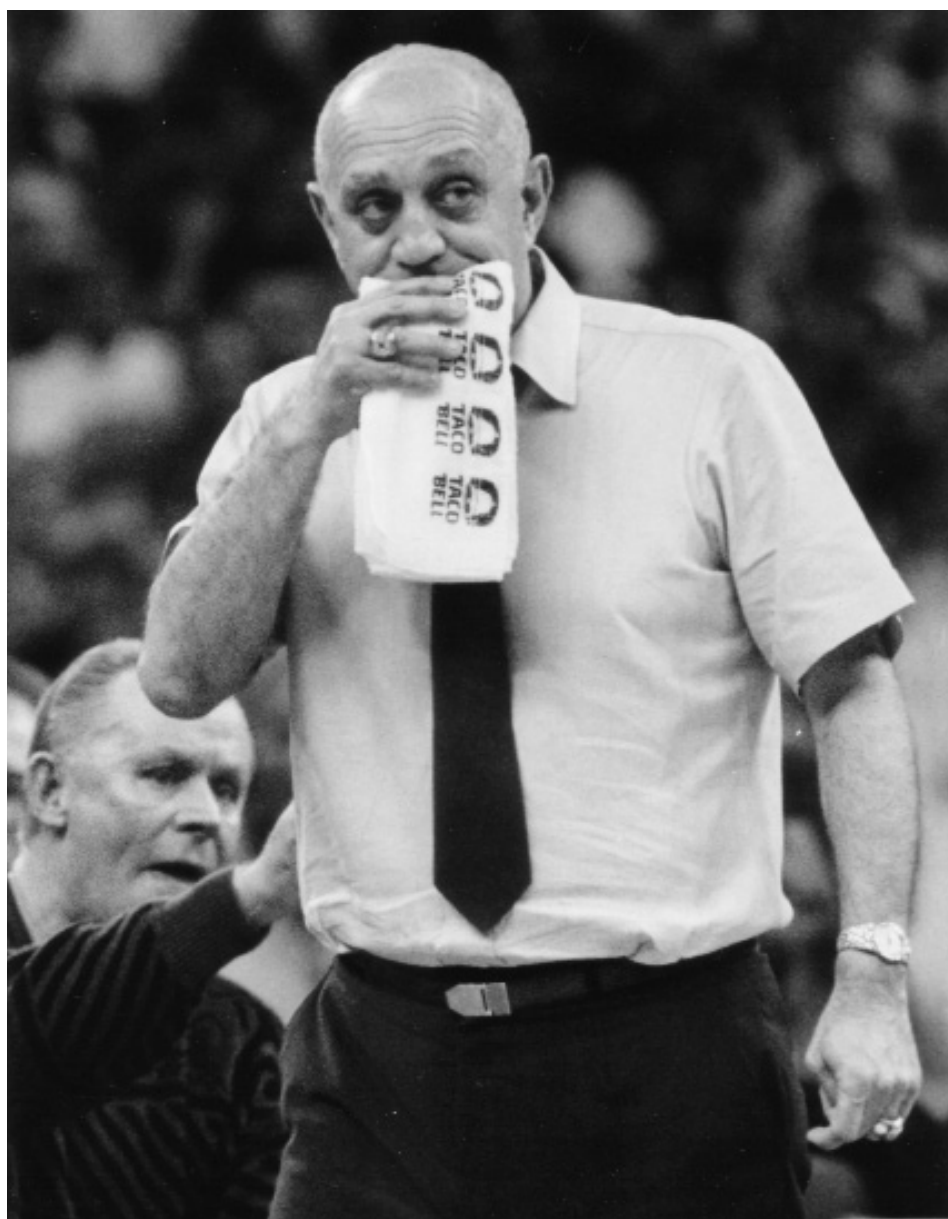
In 1973, Jerry Tarkanian arrived in Las Vegas with a formidable assignment: put a 16-year-old university on the map. And while you're at it, give a 68-year-old tourist town a tradition of its own. Tarkanian had taken less than five years to turn Long Beach State into a national power, and Donald Baepler, UNLV's president at the time, consciously sought him out so he could do the same thing in Las Vegas. "In the early '70s, if I said that I was from UNLV at various meetings, people would always ask, 'Where?'" Baepler told *The New York Times* in 1989. "We realized that we could use the athletic team to get the kind of attention that helps the academic side." For Tarkanian, it was a chance for a



Stacey Augmon (top) and Greg Anthony (above) led the "amoeba" defense, but they packed some offensive punch, too.



Coach Tarkanian (below) had a deep and talented Rebel team in 1989-90, including cover boys Stacey Augmon and Larry Johnson.



fresh start. He had already bumped heads with the NCAA in Long Beach and had written editorials denouncing the organization's tactics. Meanwhile, coaching at Long Beach meant being content to work in the shadow of both John Wooden's legendary UCLA squads and the powerhouse USC teams of the early 1970s. Tarkanian, who had come of age in the small-but-fast-growing town of Fresno, had looked at Las Vegas and seen a place he could make his own.

"He was so excited the first night we drove in," Lois Tarkanian told me in a 2007 interview. "We were in the car and we were going down the Strip. It was a warm night and there was a little breeze, and we'd pass by and somebody would say, 'Hey, Tark!' and he'd turn to me and say, 'See, this is just like dragging the main in Fresno.' When I didn't want to come here I said, 'It's a gambling city.' He said, 'No. It's a college city. It's a college town, Lois.'"

Six days after Tarkanian's arrival, the NCAA launched an investigation of UNLV. It began with allegations dating back to 1969, when John Bayer was the coach. There is no way of knowing whether these old allegations would have brought such a determined posse to town if Tarkanian hadn't come first. The case would continue for four years as the NCAA looked into new allegations ranging from gifts to players to free dental care to airplane flights for players' family members. In August 1977, five months after Tarkanian took the Rebels to their first Final Four, the NCAA put the team on two years' probation and ordered the school to suspend Tarkanian for two years. Tarkanian obtained an injunction barring the suspension and sued the NCAA, claiming the organization was a state actor and had violated his right to due process. In 1988, though, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the NCAA was a private entity and that Tarkanian had no such right.

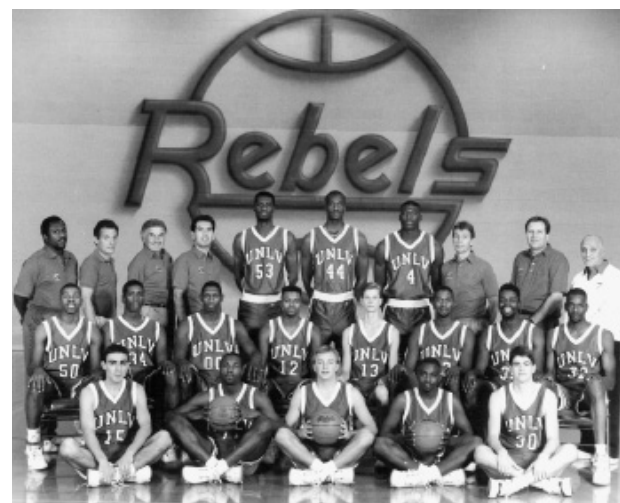
All through the 1989-90 season, it was unclear what the NCAA would do with its newfound ability to do as it pleased. It had been unable to suspend Tarkanian 12 years earlier; would it opt to do so now? Meanwhile, the Rebels spent the season in the long, slim shadow of a New York playground legend named Lloyd Daniels, who had never played for the Rebels but whose 1986 recruitment had occasioned another intensive round of NCAA investigations. In the nine months before the 1990 NCAA Tournament, the NCAA visited UNLV 11 times. If there was a smoking gun connecting, say, Tarkanian, Daniels and the Bay of Pigs, it proved elusive. But the investigation did turn up, according to Athletic Director Brad Rothermel's

assessment at the time, about \$500 in unpaid hotel incidentals from the previous season. Nine Rebels had to pay their road-trip phone bills and serve one-game suspensions.

Meanwhile, UNLV President Robert Maxson, who since 1984 had been on a quest to transform the university into an elite research institution, was celebrating the school's October 1989 designation as an "up-and-coming" institution by *U.S. News & World Report*. He was also fighting a rearguard action against the peculiar PR generated by the basketball program. "Athletically we are not a bandit school, we are not an outlaw school," he told *The New York Times*. "We're good academically, that's been documented. We've made mistakes, like other people. But we're not outlaw, we're not crooked." Those words, that repetition, the drumbeat of synonyms—*bandit, outlaw, crooked*. The defense was too defensive. Almost as if he didn't quite believe it himself.

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By the middle of the 1989-90 season, the curious malady called Runnin' Rebel Fever, most notably diagnosed in a 1983 song by George Dare—I don't need to see a doctor/Or stay in bed all day/All I need to do is just to watch those Rebels play—had progressed from dizzy infatuation to something like love. Ten times the 18,500-seat Thomas & Mack hosted more than 18,500 fans. The *Jaws* theme and the shark clap turned tip-offs into a sort of shamanic experience, at once terrifying and ecstatic. The well-heeled denizens of Gucci Row preened for national television cameras. Scalpers paid off mortgages. When the Rebels were on



Tarkanian and team photos courtesy UNLV

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the road, swanky steak houses turned into sports bars. "The town was brimming with excitement," remembers Cheryl Zellers, who has been a regular at Rebel games since 1988. "There were televisions everywhere. I went to a restaurant one evening and the place had rolled three or four televisions into each of its rooms so everyone could watch the games. People cheered as they ate and watched."

It was an age of giants: Wynn had become the Mozart of the casino-building set; Bill Bennett was watching the Excalibur battlements rise on Tropicana and the Strip; Hank Greenspun had died in the summer of 1989, but he'd lived to see his dream of Green Valley grow toward maturity; the corporate ghost of Howard Hughes had just broken ground for Summerlin. The city was embarking on a wonderful and cataclysmic growth spurt, but all anyone really wanted to talk about was the Rebels. It was a simple spiritual equation: When the body transforms, hold onto your soul. "The community owned that team because it believed that the Rebels were the best thing since bottled soda pop," says Calvert, who has been UNLV's public address announcer for 39 years. "It was just great. It galvanized the community." Lois Tarkanian describes the civic feeling of those days as "electric togetherness."

"No matter where you went, from a 7-Eleven to Caesars Palace, everyone talked about the Rebels," recalls Gabriel, whose work took him all across the country. "As soon as a person knew I was from Las Vegas they wanted to know about the Rebels. Where can I buy Rebel memorabilia? Do you attend the games? How good is Larry Johnson? Have you ever met Jerry Tarkanian?"

The love affair had a lot to do with winning, but it also had something to do with the gap in perception between the way the nation saw the city and the way the city saw itself. When Curry Kirkpatrick of *Sports Illustrated* looked at UNLV, he saw "grinnin' sons of gun and run, the progeny of Tark the Shark, the Rebels of the flashy cars and NCAA suspensions and bench-clearing brawls." When Las Vegans looked at UNLV, they saw a reflection of their city—a close-knit community, misunderstood, underestimated, uninhibited, uncompromising, allergic to hypocrisy and good-hearted to a fault.

During those years, Tarkanian was often derided as a Father Flanagan figure, giving refuge to misguided boys with impressive vertical leaping ability. In some ways, Las Vegans found the image offensive and demonstrably inaccurate; they often pointed to the 1987 Final Four squad's six seniors, five of whom graduated on schedule, as Exhibit No. 1 one of Rebel virtue. But they were also gratified by the notion of Las Vegas as a redemption-granting institution. "Tarkanian was an effective salesperson for giving people a second chance and supporting the underdog," says UNLV psychology professor Russell Hurlburt, who has followed the Rebels since 1976. "Whether he did that for his own benefit I can't say, but he was very good at convincing the community that it was worth it."

Tarkanian's success on this front was not just a function of his persuasive skills but of the perfect confluence of a man and his community. The idealized ethic of the Las Vegas at the start of the 1990s might be summed up as *We do what works, we give everyone a fair shot, we don't tell you how to live, and we ask that you don't tell us either*. For a city built on gambling, fair play was not an abstraction but a matter of honor and survival. Las Vegas didn't cheat; it welcomed the brilliant and beleaguered who had been cheated everywhere else. It was America's America.

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In the NCAA national semifinals, the Rebels came back from a seven-point halftime deficit to beat Georgia Tech and its whirlwind freshman point guard, Kenny Anderson, 90-81. Anthony had injured his ankle. Joyce Aschenbrenner, who was UNLV's assistant athletic director for communications, remembers the scene after the game: "Greg wasn't on the NCAA's schedule for the press room, but they sent me back to the locker room and made me bring him to the press center. He was



Anderson Hunt was Tark's deep threat, and he lit up Duke for 29 points in the 1990 title game.

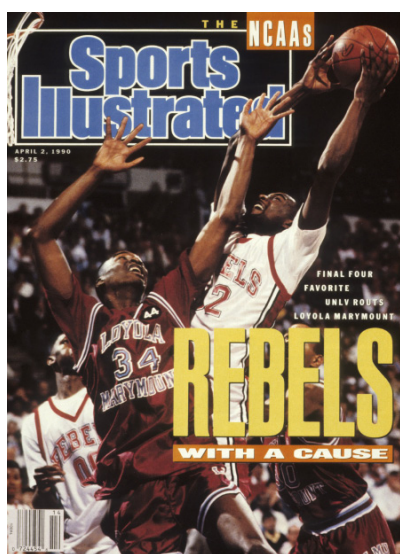
beat. He couldn't walk. They had already re-wired his jaw shut. The crutches hadn't arrived yet. So I helped him up and we dragged him across the court to the press room. He looked at me and mumbled, 'I don't know what they pay you, but it can't be enough.' He was sweating and tired, and I was practically carrying him across the court. To this day, Greg Anthony remains one of the dearest people in my life."

Such was the leader of a renowned team of thugs from the city of sin.

In 1963, Ovid Demaris and Ed Reid had written a book called *The Green Felt Jungle* whose thesis, to dispense with the nuances, was that Las Vegas was a really horrible place. Legends about the cleansing effect of Howard Hughes notwithstanding, the image of the Silver State's southern capital remained gritty enough that the first three words of *Sports Illustrated's* story on the 1990 national championship game between Duke and UNLV were "Good vs. evil." But a small miracle occurred in the space following the word "evil." There was a question mark.

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The signature moment of the basketball game played in Denver's McNichols Arena on April 2, 1990—the moment captured on the front page of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, in a two-page *SI* spread and on a T-shirt that is still folded in my third dresser drawer—was Johnson's behind-the-back save of an errant pass midway through



Sports Illustrated captured a determined Augmon and company in the 1991 regional finals (above). Opposite page: The aftermath of the Rebel run in the tournament included celebrations on and off the court, including a parade down Fremont Street and a Vegas-style congratulations along the Strip.

the first half. It was the kind of flat-out gorgeous play that survives in memory even without the mnemonic aids. But the rout wasn't really on until early in the second half, when the Rebels snapped their patented Tupperware lock-top seal on the Duke offense and suffocated the poor boys from Durham, N.C., while reeling off 18 straight points. The Rebels had a name for that defense: the amoeba. To this day, when I hear the word I have visions of Duke point guard Bobby Hurley—held to zero baskets and three assists by Hunt, Anthony and a single-celled organism—searching the arena in vain for a fire exit.

The smoke cleared. UNLV 103. Duke 73. The Rebels put on shirts that said “Shark Takes His Bite.” Tarkanian accepted the NCAA championship trophy and told the world that the victory was not sweet revenge, but it sure was sweet. No other team had ever scored 100 points in a title game, and none had beaten its opponent by such a wide margin. I was watching on a 13-inch Magnavox in an Irvine, Calif., apartment when the Rebels cut down the nets and CBS played a strings-and-piano arrangement. I generally do not cry easily when watching college basketball games.

Aschenbrenner was in Denver with the team. “I remember sitting at center court keeping the scorebook in the final game,” she says. “Right after halftime, we just really pulled away from Duke. It was just unbelievable. We were killing them. I looked across the court and my assistant Bruce Meyers was sitting in the top row of media and we caught each other’s eye and he mouthed the words ‘Oh my God.’ I got chills and literally couldn’t stop the tears. The emotion. The pressure. That was my ‘Wow this is really happening’ moment. I still get chills thinking about it.”

Back in Las Vegas, the city ascended into a state of communal ecstasy. “People up and down the street came out of their homes and screamed and shouted,” Zellers remembers. “People were driving down the expressway honking their horns and screaming out their windows. Strangers were high-fiving.”

Halfway around the world, Robert Smith, the point guard on the Rebels’ 1977 Final Four team, was playing in France when he realized that the little school he’d helped make a name for itself was now an international sensation. “I had a bunch of Rebels stuff,” Smith says. “People were trying to get it off me. They knew UNLV had won the championship. It went all over the world when the Rebels won. To come back here and see the fans, all the people affiliated with UNLV, you could just see the light in people. I think it changed the city a little bit. Everyone used to look at Vegas like a small city. After they won the national championship, I think they realized that this city was going to become one of the major cities.”

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At this point, the story should trail off into the ho-hum magnificence of dynasty. But on July 20, 1990, the ever-dogged NCAA declared that, as a final punishment for violations committed in the early 1970s, the Rebels would be unable to defend their NCAA championship. By that time, Johnson, Augmon and Anthony—all potential high picks—had already skipped the NBA draft. Under the headline “Loyalty and Commitment,” the 1990-91 media guide published statements from Johnson, Augmon, Anthony and others asking the NCAA to reconsider. “No one,” wrote Anthony, “should have the right to take this away from us.” On Nov. 30, UNLV and the NCAA worked out a deal: The Rebels could defend, but they would be banned from the postseason in 1992. The 1990-91 Rebels won their first 34 games. Almost none of them were close. Around town, and around the nation, people began to wonder whether the Rebels were the greatest team ever to play college basketball.

On March 30, 1991, in the semifinals of the NCAA Tournament, the Duke Blue Devils defeated the Rebels, 79-77.

“It was as if a giant vacuum had sucked the air out of Las Vegas,” Zellers remembers. “Everyone was stunned. It was as quiet as I have ever heard.”

On the morning of May 26, readers of the *Review-Journal* woke up to a front-page photograph, reportedly shot in the autumn of 1989, of Hunt, Butler and forward Moses Scurry in a hot tub. The fellow in the tub with them was named Richie Perry. Perry’s nickname was “The Fixer.” No one ever demonstrated that a UNLV game had been “fixed.” But that was the morning the Rebels were broken.

Perry was connected with Daniels. Daniels was connected with the NCAA’s adrenal gland. Maxson was not pleased. The Rebels’ game programs that year had included an open letter from Maxson celebrating the university’s record enrollment of 18,200, its 40 freshly admitted Nevada high school valedictorians, and its most recent *U.S. News & World Report* appellation as “a rising star” in higher education. He also saluted “the collection of wonderful young men who make up this team” and “their dedicated and talented coaches.” Now that the wonderful young men had been photographed in a tub, Maxson had

“I had a bunch of Rebels stuff. People were trying to get it off me. They knew UNLV had won the championship. It went all over the world when the Rebels won.”

to decide whether the valedictorians and the talented coaches could fruitfully coexist in the public imagination.

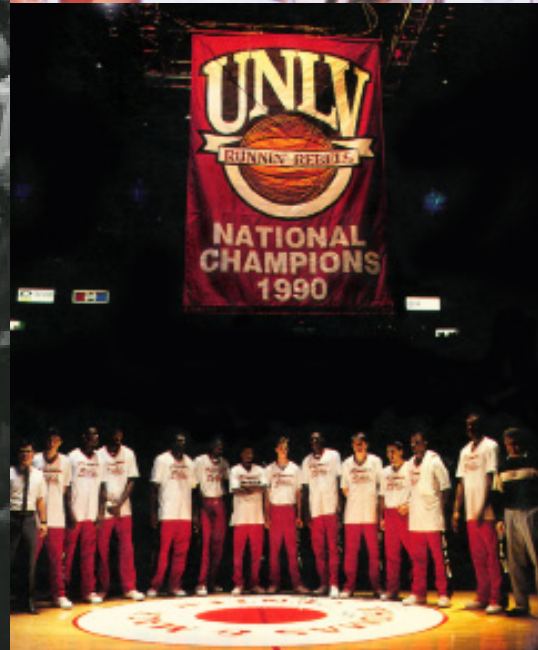
On June 7, Jerry Tarkanian announced that the upcoming season would be his last.

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April 2, 1990, was a great day to be a Las Vegan. It’s tempting to brush aside everything but the pure feeling of elation, to mourn its loss and long for its return. Why remember the whole tangled context of the age? Why remember that the 1980s were a decade when two crusaders came to town in white hats and realized that everything in Vegas is a shade of gray? Why remember Joe Yablonsky, the FBI agent who came to bust the mafia, did his job well and was hounded out of town? Why dwell upon the reign of Maxson, who came to build a great university and wound up excising the city’s soul? Why remind ourselves that in those days the nation didn’t really think Sin City had a soul, and legislated accordingly? In 1987, Congress designated a ridge 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas as the only spot worth studying as a holding cell for the nation’s nuclear refuse. It was the story of the decade. We called it the “Screw Nevada Bill.” Sometimes at night, when our minds got hazy, we thought it had been drafted by the NCAA.

We remember these things because they remind us why we loved the things we loved. Our chip-on-the-shoulder city had spent 19 years with a basketball coach who mirrored its every strength and weakness. On certain days when the Rebels were pasting some hapless foe by 35, individuals achieved a sort of transcendental union with team and town. On such days the public sphere seemed to begin and end and begin again with Jerry Tarkanian: Our city was so besotted with Tark that the hottest bar in Vegas had borrowed his nickname. The Shark Club had once been called Jubilation, and Jubilation had once been owned by Paul Anka, who wrote what ought to have been Tark’s theme song, “My Way.” Is it worth remembering that the walls of Jubilation had been covered with mirrors? We loved ourselves back then. The city was all elbows and knees, ready to grow into itself and conquer the world, checking its reflection for blemishes, worrying for a moment what everyone thought, then dismissing the worries and, for one last time before adulthood set in, grinning slyly and thinking, *Screw them.* ■

Photos opposite page: at left courtesy Las Vegas News Bureau; top three photos on right courtesy UNLV; Bottom right, Rich Clarkson/Allsport



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GREAT COMEDY
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GEORGE HIRSCHMANN
LEE ALLAN
MUSICAL DIRECTOR STEVE BEYER

TOP RANK / ESPN BOXING
ROGER MAYWEATHER
VS IDELMAR PAISAN
THURSDAY APRIL 5 10:00 PM

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