

# Massimino era begins

by Ched Whitney

This season the UNLV basketball program, seemingly always in a state of unrest, undergoes its biggest change. One coaching legend replaces another as Rollie Massimino, head coach at Villanova for 19 seasons, replaces Jerry Tarkanian, who is now coach of the NBA San Antonio Spurs.

Everyone involved hopes it will be a smooth transition.

Massimino inherits a team with a 23-game win streak (the nation's longest). But it is also a team without a proven center. From last season's 26-2 team only one player, little-used sophomore Danny Griffin (6-foot-9), is taller than 6-7. The Rebels' top three returning scorers, J.R. Rider, Dexter Boney and Evric Gray (6-foot-5, 6-foot-4 and 6-foot-7 respectively) are better suited to guard or small forward. Still, a likely starting lineup would feature Gray at center, Rider at power forward, Boney at small forward, and Dedan Thomas and Reggie Manuel at the guard positions.

Massimino knows he enters this seasons with a height-disadvantaged team. But he is a coach that knows a thing or two about making big things happen despite disadvantages.

In 1985, Massimino coached his Wildcats to the national title. Villanova entered the tournament that year with a 20-10 record but surprised everyone by defeating top-ranked Georgetown 66-64 in the title game. Many consider the Wildcats' performance—defeating the Patrick-Ewing led Hoyas—one of the best ever.

In all Massimino led Villanova to 16 post-season berths (15 in the last 16), including 11 trips to the NCAA tournament.

Prior to Villanova, Massimino coached at the University of Pennsylvania for two years. He led Penn to the Ivy League title both seasons.

Taking over for Tarkanian—the NCAA's all-time winningest coach by percentage—is no small task. And part of the battle may be off the court: winning over the fans. Tarkanian's popularity in Las Vegas is well documented.

If the Rebels' start-of-the-year practice Midnight Madness on Nov. 1 is any indication, the support will be there.

"Midnight Madness indicated a nice response," Massimino said of the 9,000-plus crowd that showed up for the late-night event.

On the court, Massimino will work with what he has and use

it to build the future on.

One of the biggest factors in putting this year's team in position for an NCAA tournament berth for Massimino was developing a relationship with Rider.

The junior reportedly considered skipping his senior year and going into the NBA draft. Instead, he concentrated on school and arrived at practice ready to be a leader.

"He (Rider) has responded tremendously well," Massimino said. "We have a healthy relationship."

Massimino has been asked constantly what style of play his Rebels would use—"Will they keep the 'runnin' in the Runnin' Rebels?"

"We really want to run," Massimino has said. "But it becomes a 'Catch 22' situation because we're very thin (in numbers), and getting into foul trouble could be devastating."

Defensively, the '92-93 Rebels likely will look similar to Tarkanian UNLV teams.

"Tarkanian really emphasized defense and we're trying to do the same," Massimino said. "He and I think a lot alike defensively, so that made things a lot easier."

The "family" atmosphere that has surrounded Massimino-coached teams. This factored



photo by Wray Halterman

Rollie Massimino, pictured here with Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda, won 60 percent of his games while at Villanova.

greatly into President Robert Maxson and Athletic Director Jim Weaver's search for a new coach. At Villanova, Massimino graduated all 62 of his senior players.

A lot of unknowns exist going into the season's start Friday against Russia-Select.

"It has been a great time up to now, and I'm looking forward to getting down on the basketball court and seeing our team put itself in the right position," Massimino said.

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