

Rebels' season spins out of control with Rider controversy

UNLV drops finale to USC, 90-74

BY PAUL GUTIERREZ
SPORTS EDITOR

For the Runnin' Rebels, last Wednesday night's season-ending 90-74 loss to Southern Cal was the end of a long, frustrating and emotional run to, as fate would have it, nowhere. The Trojans played Dr. Jack Kervorkian to UNLV's patient in dire need of a mercy killing.

In sports, timing is everything. And no one on the Rebels could have possibly in their wildest dreams foreseen the events of the past two weeks which culminated with J.R. Rider's suspension and subsequent Rebel loss.

Timing brought out a teacher's claim that she was "pressured" and a tutor's confession that they did work for Rider. Both occurred at the most critical part of the season.

"I never thought it would end like this," said junior reserve Fred Haygood in an emotional locker room following the USC loss. "With everything going on with J.R. and then going to the NIT, who would have thought that? It's just frustrating the way (the season) ended."

Timing and the cruel twist of fate dealt the Rebels a bad hand that started the day they left for Long Beach, Calif., to begin the Big West Tournament. Probes into Rider's academic standing and whether or not the star forward was attending class had been in effect since mid-February. But on that fateful day, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* printed Rider's grade report from the Fall 1991 semester, which showed five failing marks. The paper also quoted Vicki Bertolini,

no, Rider's summer school English teacher at Nellis Air Force Base, as saying that she was pressured by school administrators into giving the future NBA draft pick a grade and that she should have failed him. She also questioned whether the work turned in by him was his own.

The Rebels went on to soundly defeat Utah State in the first round of the conference tourney as Rider scored 35 points in the win. But UNLV was upset in the semis by eventual champion Long Beach State, 79-77, as Rider missed a

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—Evrice Gray

10-footer at the buzzer that would have sent the game into overtime.

Rider was at the receiving end of numerous chants, signs, and articles by the Long Beach faithful during the tourney. Sections of the crowd would chant "P.M.S." with Rider at the free-throw line in reference to a class he took in Prevention and Maintenance of Pre-Menstrual Syndrome at UNLV. The Long Beach media joked about the cramps Rider suffered from during the Utah St. contest. And fans carried signs which read "J.R. Rider, Ph.D.," and "UNLV: Home of Scholars and Convicts."

Then the NCAA surprisingly left the Rebels off the invitation list for the 64-team tournament, despite the fact that UNLV had been ranked all season long. The bid for the less-prestigious National Invitation Tournament was accepted and it was thought that an NIT banner was in the works.

But then a tutor admitted to writing part of a paper for Rider. And following practice last Tuesday (the day after Rider was named second team All-American), Athletic Director Jim Weaver notified Rider that his playing career at UNLV was over.

Rider, who ended up being the

Rebels garner awards

Controversy-stricken J.R. Rider heads the list of Runnin' Rebel awards. The senior forward was recently named to the second team All-America squad. Rider was also the Big West Conference's Player of the Year and was a first-team all-BWC selection with mates Evrice Gray and Dexter Boney. Rider was also named to the league's all-tourney team.

First-year player Lawrence Thomas was named to the league's all-freshman team. Dedan Thomas, surprisingly left off the Big West teams, was named All-America honorable mention.

nation's No. 2 scorer at 29.1 ppg, showed up just before tip-off against Troy and received a standing ovation from the sparse crowd at the Thomas & Mack. Despite exchanging hugs and the like, it was painfully obvious that his mates were in no mood to play, feeling scorned by the NCAA, the school, and the media.

The post-game Rebel locker room, opened to the media for the first time all season, was a testament to the pain and disillusionment felt by the misty-eyed UNLV hoopsters. Several players, in their scorn for the local media, refused to speak to those they felt had brought them down at this crucial time of the season.

"At one time we were 16-2," point-guard Dedan Thomas said. "I don't know what happened at the end of the season. We lost a few tough ones on the road and really, I don't know. I can't even say what happened. It's really tough to call."

In years past, Runnin' Rebel

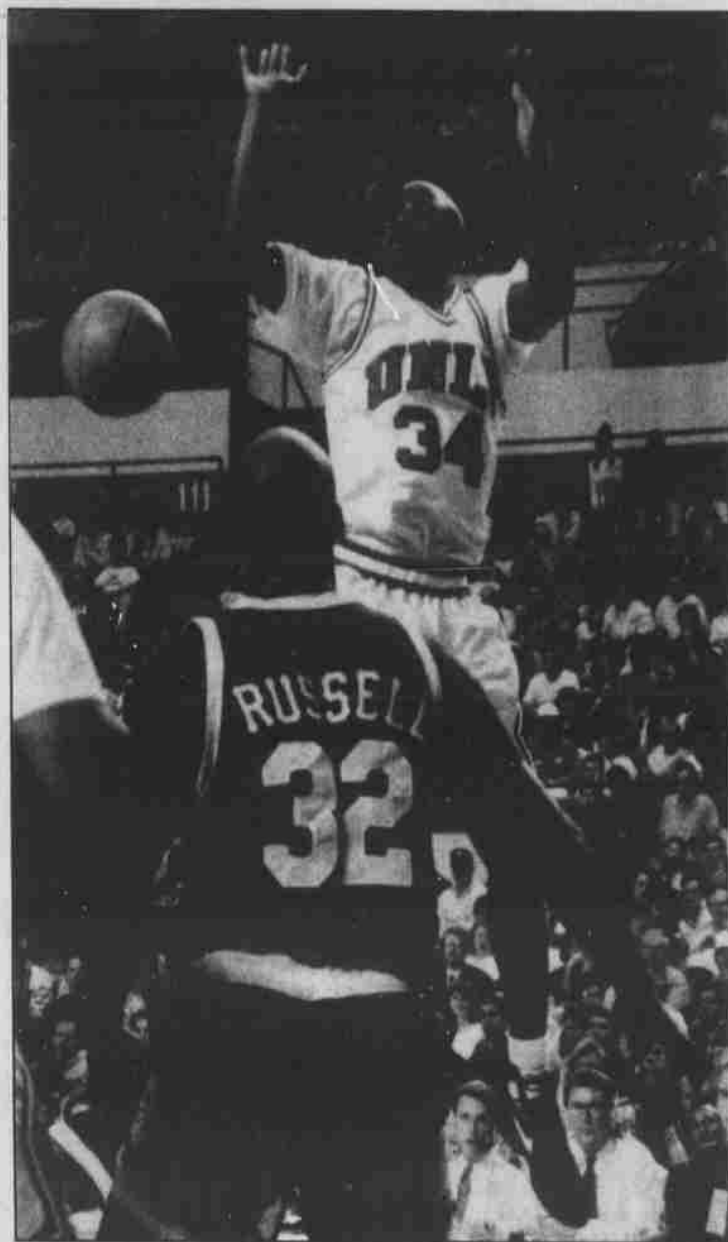


PHOTO BY WRAY HALTERMAN

J. R. Rider and the Rebels saw their season come to a stunning and premature end, culminating with Rider's suspension.

teams have thrived under pressure. But this season, UNLV folded under the constant strain, a fact noted by Thomas.

"I don't know if it was too much (pressure) or if the magnitude of the problem was too big. I think this thing with J.R. is far from over. I don't know what's going to happen," Thomas said.

Rider then held his own press conference the day after the USC loss, claiming he was a scapegoat used by UNLV officials.

"I have been made to suffer and been deeply humiliated by what has occurred during the past several days," Rider said in

a prepared statement. "I have been hung out to dry publicly by university administrators who refuse to accept their own responsibilities for the events that have led up to the last few days."

Ah, yes. The last few days. With such an unforeseeable finish to a season that started out with such great promise, perhaps Evrice Gray summed it up best after the USC game.

Said Gray: "I guess they finally got what they wanted."

The Rebels, ranked No. 25 in the final AP poll, dropped six of their final 11 games and finished the season at 21-8.

Accountability is lacking in Rider scandal

BY JAY SAPOVITS

The media was busy last week gathering quotes from every possible person involved with J.R. Rider in his two years at UNLV. The following are four quotes that summarize this entire event. The statements speak for themselves, my interpretation is much more succinct:

"J.R. verbalized his thought process to the tutor, who wrote it down. That is not academic fraud," Steve Stein, legal counsel for Rider, said in a press conference last week.

Does anybody at the university believe that? I don't.

"I am publicly stating that I am being made a scapegoat by the university administration," Rider said at the same conference. "I've been hung out to dry publicly by the university administration that refuses to accept responsibility."

When Rider said university administrators wouldn't accept responsibility, wasn't he merely displacing responsi-

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bility?

"J.R. loves (Coach) Rollie (Massimino). Rollie loves J.R. He's almost a surrogate father to him," Stein said in response Massimino was the intended target of Rider's statement.

No! Just plain no!

"I am aware of the attempt J.R. made to pursue his education and complete the work," UNLV Athletic Director Jim Weaver said about Rider's feelings of betrayal.

Let me take a guess. No attempt?

Rider does not belong in college. He was ineligible his senior year of high school and then again showed his unwillingness to learn when he received five failing grades during one semester at UNLV.

If Massimino was intent on purifying the image of UNLV then why did he encourage an NBA-bound Rider to stay in school? Obviously because Rid-

er could help UNLV win games. And with wins, the coach's \$600,000 job stays secure. Unfortunately in doing so, Massimino violated a statement made at his first press conference as Rebel coach: "In no way will any student/athlete embarrass this school. Ever!"

Wrong! The only thing more embarrassing than the events of the last week is looking back on that quote. Massimino is a basketball coach. He's in Las Vegas to win games and no other snow job or crazy-cornered statement should be tolerated. Does he care that "The J.R. and Vicki Show" ever happened? Sure, but only because it makes his pin-point Giorgio Armani reputation have a slight wrinkle.

Unethical teachers exist. Unfortunately there are people despicable enough to compromise their principles such as Vicki Bertolino did.

Now the university must act, not just against Rider but against whoever is proven to be involved.

Grades, not free cars, are the issue now and that's what this place is all about. Basketball is

a sport and the moment it becomes anything else, it should be relegated to its meager existence at the bottom of the university's agenda.

Typical of any controversy, the main participants refuse to accept responsibility.

Neither Rider nor Bertolino have yet to shoulder any blame for causing this school unneeded humiliation. That alone represents the biggest travesty in this entire ordeal.

A star athlete turned in work other than his own and a professor—who formerly taught at UNLV—handed him a grade. Like candy, when 20 nagging 10 year-olds are knocking on her door at Halloween, Bertolino just gave Rider an unearned C-. The only difference is, Bertolino probably turns her light off during Halloween.

Last week, the letters U-N-L-V characterized images of cheaters and cover-up artists, and not a place labeled "an up and coming university." The university's academics were lambasted from

coast to coast. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* featured articles which portrayed this university in a negative way.

Recruiting violations of the worst nature pale in comparison to giving an athlete a grade. That is what happened. For a moment forget the quality of the work and suppose the assignment Rider has been criticized for was indeed his own. Bertolino still said he didn't deserve a passing grade in the course. But pressure from UNLV administrators made her fold and start giving out grades. Bertolino must be a weak human being to sacrifice her career and principles over a few phone calls.

Unethical teachers like Bertolino ought to be banished from ever walking in a school again, let alone teaching at this one.

—Jay Sapovits is
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and Rebel Yell columnist.