

UNLV Gives Sheppard a Wealth of Experience

ATHLETICS:
Coordinator of Sports Information accepts a similar post with the NBA's Denver Nuggets.

BY PAUL GUTIERREZ
 SPORTS EDITOR

Tommy Sheppard looks back at Jan. 23, 1993 and smiles broadly. It was the highlight of his three years as a Sports Information Director and later Coordinator of Sports Information at UNLV, he said. The men's basketball program was back in the national limelight, having just destroyed Georgetown, 96-80, in a sold out Thomas & Mack Center in CBS's Game of the Week.

J.R. Rider scored a then-career record 40 points against the Hoyas, the Rebels were 11-1 after the win and moved into the Top 10. Runnin' Rebel fever was back.

"That all seems like 10 years ago now," Sheppard said earlier this week in light of the latest controversies with men's basketball. "That was the most exciting day of my career here."

But now, with the Rebels coming off a 15-13 season, questions being raised about Coach Rollie Massimino's secret contract, and top recruit Dennis "Baby Shaq" Jordan not transferring in due to academic reasons, UNLV athletics is at a new

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—Twenty-six year old Tommy Sheppard.

low.

Since joining the school's sports information office in 1991, Sheppard has dealt with disseminating information to the media, both local and national, in the most turbulent of times. From the "Keep Tark-Fire Maxson Feud" to the J.R. Rider academic fraud scandal to last summer's drop-classes-for-refund-checks football scandal to Rollie's secret contract, Sheppard has seen it all.

And he's only 26 years old. But as the SID for men's basketball, football and golf, Sheppard definitely has experience in controversy.

Maybe that's why the NBA's Denver Nuggets recently hired Sheppard as the club's Director of Media Relations out of 223 applicants.

"After working here, it's just who gets the job done," said Sheppard, who leaves Las Vegas Sunday. "Age doesn't matter. What matters is your performance."

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Sheppard got here at UNLV on a curious route. Sheppard played football at New Mexico State as a defensive back. But he said he wasn't very good.

"I was a practice player," he said. But his roommate, Dat Ly, was a Vietnamese place kicker for the Aggies and was receiving a lot of press. Sheppard was intrigued by the role of the school's SID.

He told the SID, Steve Shutt, he would be willing to help if the opportunity ever arose.

It did. Sheppard took stats for NMSU in a football game against, drum roll please, UNLV. "Which is ironic as hell now," Sheppard said. Soon he became the school's football SID.

Sheppard then went to graduate school at Northeast Louisiana. An opening in the UNLV Sports Information Department came, Sheppard got wind of it and he called then-Sports Information Director Joe Hawk. He told Hawk he'd love to work here, and he arrived in the fall of 1991.

When Hawk left in late 1992, Sheppard was promoted to Coordinator of Sports Information. The scandals he has had to deal with have not left Sheppard a bitter man but an experienced one, he said.

"I never dwelled on anything that happened here," Sheppard said. "Once it's in the books, you can't look back. You can't afford to."

"You don't believe in people, you believe in the institution. People are going to come and go.

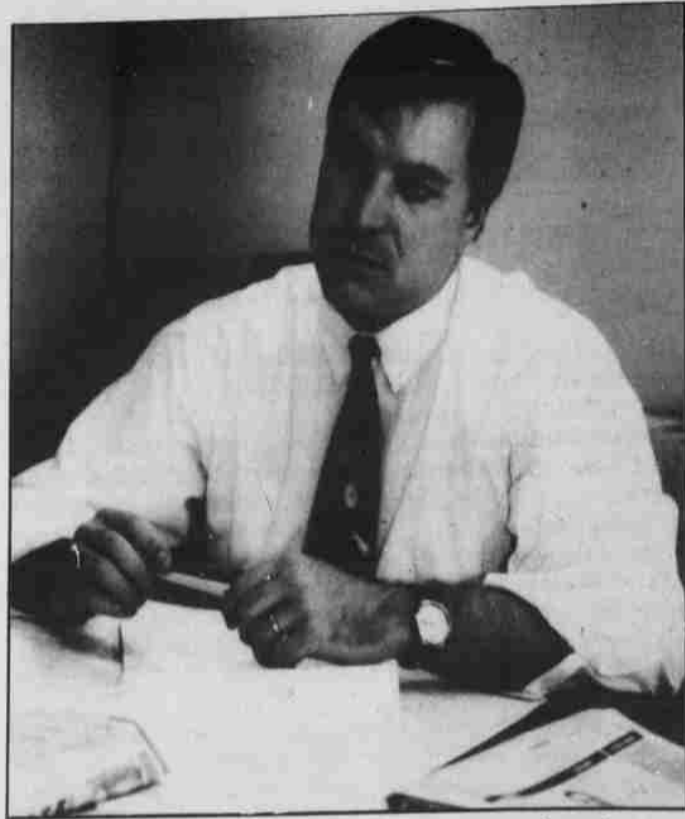


PHOTO BY LESLIE LITCHFIELD

Tommy Sheppard has worked in the school's sports information department since 1991.

I'm going to come and go, Rollie's going to come and go, (Athletic Director) Jim Weaver's going to come and go. You've got to believe and support the institution. You can't just support the people. If you don't like a coach, that's fine. But the kids need your support to be successful."

Sheppard said UNLV will always be in the limelight.

"People love Las Vegas," he said. "And they love the Runnin' Rebels. No matter how bad things get here, it will still be the focus of national attention."

But will it be in a negative

manner? Sheppard doesn't think so.

"The perception out there with UNLV is hard to fight," he said. "But at the same time there's so many positive things you can throw back at them. If someone's tearing down our basketball program, it's hard to say 'Well, look at our golf program.' What I point out is the (move to the) WAC in '96 and we have the best on-campus facility in the west (in the T&M). It's awesome. When the support is there, it's fantastic."

Spoken like a true NBA man.



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