

# Mavericks fire Johnson after playoff departure

## Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS - From the start, Avery Johnson was a perfect fit as coach of the Dallas Mavericks. At the end, it was pretty obvious he wasn't. Johnson lost his job this week, a move the team referred to as "relieving him of his duties."

The softer tone made sense considering that in three-plus seasons Johnson guided the Mavericks to the finals for the first time and to a club-record 67 wins the following season.

Yet for all the high points, there were some serious lows — blowing a 2-0 lead in those finals, getting dumped in the first round of the playoffs after that 67-win season and then, the final straw, getting knocked out in the first

round again this season after Dallas shook up its roster and mortgaged some of its future to acquire Jason Kidd.

Over those three straight postseason wipeouts, the Mavericks lost 12 of 15 games, including all nine on the road.

"Was it time for a change? I guess," said Dirk Nowitzki, who became the league MVP under Johnson's watch. "I think this franchise, we owe him a lot. Unfortunately it's just one of those situations where everybody's got to move on."

The final mark during Johnson's tenure: 194-70 in the regular season, 23-24 in the playoffs.

Johnson got the news during a meeting at his condominium Wednesday morn-



Avery Johnson was fired as coach of the Dallas Mavericks.

ing. Donnie Nelson, the team's president of basketball operations, was there, while team owner Mark Cuban joined via cell phone

from Chicago.

Johnson flew to Houston soon after because his son had an accident at school. He will meet with reporters

Thursday, but called in to the local ESPN affiliate, KESN, to talk about his dismissal.

"This is something that needed to happen," Johnson said. "There's no animosity or bitterness. We all still really care about each other, but it was time to go in a different direction. ... We didn't win the championship, but if you look at the whole body of work that we put together over the last 3 1/2 years ... we'll put it up against anybody."

Johnson might not be unemployed very long. The New York Knicks and Chicago Bulls are among the teams needing coaches, and both might want a young, proven coach who preaches defense and discipline.

The Mavs were 35-18 before giving up young point guard Devin Harris and a package of players and picks for Kidd. They went 16-13 after he arrived — 17-17 counting the playoffs.

"We probably could have opened it up a little more, have a little more free flow, let Jason create and not just make him a weakside spot-

up shooter," Nowitzki said. "But, you know, Avery had us believing in the system, and that's the way he thought we could be the most efficient."

Nowitzki hopes the next coach retains at least some of Johnson's emphasis on defense.

"You don't basically want to go back to the Nellie days where we just run and gun and have fun, and you get scored on every time down," Nowitzki said.

Nelson turned the Mavericks from lottery regulars to playoff regulars, then to title contenders. He just couldn't get them to the finals.

Johnson did.

A championship-winning point guard for San Antonio during his long career, Johnson became Dallas' coach-in-waiting in 2004-05. His wait ended just a few months later. He finished that regular season 16-2, then won his first playoff series. Then, in his first full season in charge, the Mavericks reached the NBA finals and Johnson was named coach of the year.

## First Black coach in Div.-I succumbs

AUBURN HILLS, Mich. (AP) — Will Robinson, the first Black basketball coach at a Division I school and a Detroit Pistons scout who discovered Joe Dumars and Dennis Rodman, died Monday. He was 96.

Robinson died at a Detroit hospital, Pistons spokesman Matt Dobek said. Robinson had been sick for 15 months and in a nursing home for more than a year, Dobek added.

Robinson broke a racial barrier in the 1970s when he coached Illinois State. He joined the Pistons as a scout in 1976, and the additions of Dumars and Rodman were keys to Detroit's 1989 and 1990 NBA championships. Those teams were coached by Chuck Daly, who took the job after Robinson declined former general manager Jack McCloskey's offer.

"Will Robinson was truly a legend and will be missed dearly," Dumars said. "He was a huge inspiration for me and so many others. He was simply the best."

Robinson scouted for the Pistons for 28 years and scouted part time for the NFL's Detroit Lions for 22 years.

Midway through the 2003-04 season, en route to their third title, the Pistons renamed their locker room the "Will Robinson Locker Room of Champions."

"He's someone that's going to be missed, not only by the Pistons but by the City of Detroit," Pistons coach Flip Saunders said.

"He was a civil rights pio-

neer," said Pistons trainer Mike Abdenour, hired by the franchise in the mid-1970s. "He didn't let the color of his skin deter him from his dreams."

"I think it's really ironic that the NAACP had a big event here last night and Will passed away the next day," he said. The NAACP's annual Fight for Freedom Fund Dinner was Sunday in Detroit.

Robinson joined Spencer Haywood in a successful legal challenge to the NBA's ban on underclassmen. Haywood, a member of Robinson's Detroit Pershing 1967 state championship high school team, left the University of Detroit to sign with the ABA's Denver Rockets.

The 1967 Pershing team featured not only Haywood but four others who went on to play professional sports: Ralph Simpson (ABA, NBA), Glen Doughty and Paul Seal (NFL) and Marvin Lane (baseball).

Robinson was inducted into a number of halls of fame, including the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame in 1982. Accolades aside, he took pride in helping more than 300 youngsters attend college on sports scholarships.

"My grandparents raised me," Robinson once told *The Detroit News*. "Sports was a family thing, and I coached that way — whether a kid needed money, clothing, a place to stay. I put all these things into a family. And (many of) the players who played for me, I got into col-

lege. Some are doctors. Some are lawyers."

Born in Wadesboro, N.C., Robinson quarterbacked the Steubenville (Ohio) High football team and finished second in the state high school golf tournament despite not being allowed to play the course at the same time as Whites.

He won 15 letters in four sports at West Virginia State College before graduating in 1937.

While scouting for the Lions, Robinson scoured Black colleges in the South for talent. His finds included Jackson State cornerback Lem Barney, who went on to a Pro Football Hall of Fame career.

He coached the Illinois State basketball team from 1970-75 and had a 78-51 record without a losing season. His best player was Doug Collins, who was

drafted by Philadelphia with the No. 1 overall pick in 1973.

"I'm incredibly sad that I lost a guy that I loved as much as anybody in the world," Collins said. "He taught me the essence of life that has served me well from the age of 18 to 56 because he was more of a life coach than a basketball coach."

In 2004, Robinson said he was sorry he didn't accept McCloskey's offer to coach the Pistons.

"I know I could have won championships with those teams. But after coaching for as long as I had, I found it a relief to not be coaching," he said then.

A viewing is scheduled in Detroit on Friday. After the funeral Saturday, a celebration of Robinson's life will be held at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History.

## Scott

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trade of star guard Baron Davis to the Golden State Warriors.

New Orleans then drafted Chris Paul and won 38 games in his rookie season, during which the team also was displaced to Oklahoma City by Hurricane Katrina.

The Hornets spent a second season in Oklahoma, winning 39 games and narrowly missing the playoffs despite a rash of injuries to Paul and fellow starters Peja Stojakovic, Tyson Chandler and David West.

This season, they returned to New Orleans full time and Scott became a front-runner for coach of the year after the Hornets went into the All-Star break with the best record in the Western Conference. That earned Scott the nod to coach the West squad in the All-Star game, which was hosted by New Orleans and included two Hornets players Paul and West.

New Orleans won what many considered the toughest division in the NBA, finishing ahead of San Antonio, Houston and Dallas, all 50-win teams.

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