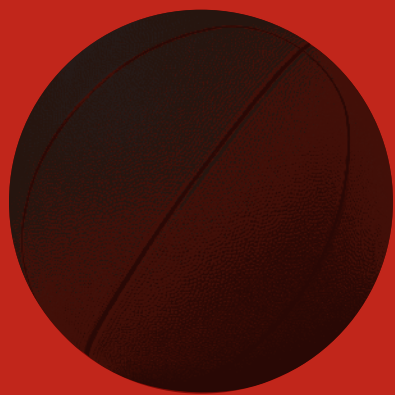
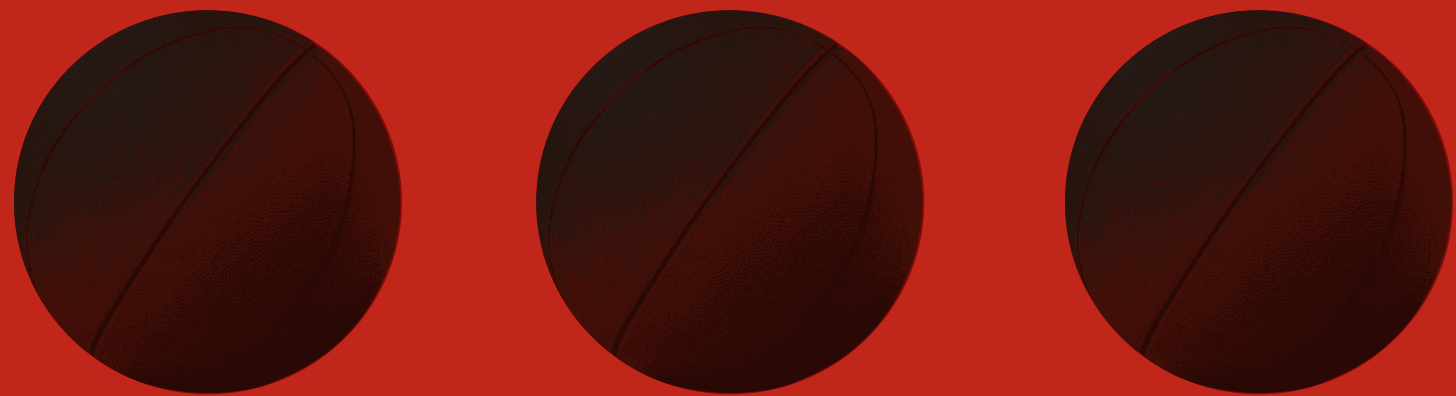


# CHAPTER



# THE IN THE BEGINNING

Back when the university was first started, Las Vegas was quite a different city than it is today. It was still a small town where virtually everyone knew each other. Gaming drove the economy exclusively, and those who started UNLV and its sports program knew they had to put an exciting basketball team on the court in order to compete with the excitement of the casinos.

In just a few years, players all over the country who didn't even know who UNLV was, much less know anything about their basketball program, wanted to play for the team. It all began in 1951, when someone had a vision of creating a university in Southern Nevada. This notion had been a long time coming, as there had been an established university up north in Reno since the 1860s, with some classes being taught in Las Vegas as an extension.

By 1955 the stirrings became reality as the Board of Regents expanded the curriculum in Southern Nevada, laying the foundation for a separate school with its own identity. With the support of the local community, the regents were able to acquire 163 acres of land bordering Maryland Parkway, just south of the Las Vegas city limits.

By June 1957, Maude Frazier Hall, the first building, was built on the campus of what was then called Nevada Southern. It was a lone structure on a large plot of land, but it was still considered home when the university

officially opened its doors with an enrollment of approximately 800 students. This upstart school appropriately took on an upstart nickname of the Rebels.

At Nevada Southern those 800 students were immediately searching for an identity. They went to Bill Carlson who was the dean, and asked if the school would be willing to start a sports team—basketball, football, baseball—it didn't matter to them. The students saw the excitement being generated from the teams at University of Nevada-Reno, and other institutions, and they wanted it for themselves.

Carlson agreed with them, and in 1958 he contacted Michael "Chub" Drakulich, an Ely native. Drakulich had graduated from the UNR a few years before and knew all about college and professional sports. He was a second baseman for the school's baseball team and had played professionally for the Reno Silver Sox. In his career as a coach, he had taken Fallon High School to the state

basketball tournament five of the six years he coached and then moved to Rancho High School in North Las Vegas where he was achieving similar success.

Drakulich was proud of his upbringing, and he loved Nevada. He also loved Las Vegas. To him, Las Vegas was the land of opportunity—a place where a person could make something of himself.

Drakulich always loved a challenge, but the notion of coaching for UNLV was a daunting one. For starters, his operating budget would be a mere \$10,000. That small sum had to pay for everything—equipment, uniforms, travel, referees; anything that the program would need had to come from that money. Secondly, his salary would not fairly match the amount of work needed to start a team from scratch, although it would be a little more than he was making at Rancho. In addition, he would have to teach three or four courses along with his coaching and accompanying administrative duties.

It was a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, and Drakulich decided to take it. Little did he realize what he was in for. “We had absolutely nothing,” Drakulich said. “We had no equipment, no uniforms, no players, no place to play, no schedule. But I was young and ambitious. I probably didn’t know any better.”

Somehow, though, it got done. Bruce Trent, who was running the Las Vegas Parks and Recreation Department at the time, offered Drakulich use of the Dula Recreation Center on Bonanza Road as a home court and a place to practice.

Then he drafted a team. The majority of the roster was comprised of local players, some of whom had played for Drakulich at Rancho and others who had played against him while at Las Vegas and Basic high schools. He even found several schools in Utah willing to play his new team, and they were willing to pay him to travel.

Drakulich would get \$200 to go to Southern Utah University in Cedar City or to Dixie College in St. George. Service ball was still popular in 1958, and a team from Nellis Air Force Base had a squad that was willing to play the college kids. So did a team from the naval station in Long Beach.

By early December, the Rebels of Nevada Southern were ready to represent their one-year old school at the Dula Center against Southern Utah. It was a competitive game and the Rebels, led by a 6-foot-2 shooting guard named Bernie Fumagalli, played against the Thunderbirds. Southern Utah prevailed 57-52. “We didn’t have a real big crowd for that first game,” Drakulich said of the inaugural contest. “We had cheerleaders and those who showed up were enthusiastic. But we lost and we lost several after that.”

The Rebels lost the first nine games before finally beating Nellis 52-47 for the first official victory in school history. They would win four more games that year, twice beating the Long Beach navy squad and twice beating the UNR freshman team.

“We had a nucleus of local kids, and they were going to stick it out,” Drakulich said of how he held things together that first year which saw Nevada Southern go 5-13. “I knew this was going to take time, and we weren’t going to be a success overnight. But I felt that as long as we kept making progress each year and kept getting better, we would be all right.”

The following year, the Rebels posted a winning record, going 13-8. Like the team, the campus was also beginning to take shape, and by 1961 the team had its own on-campus gym seating 2,000 people. “They had built an outdoor court in 1959, and we would practice on the asphalt,” Drakulich recalled. “So getting the campus gym was a huge step for us.” The team felt like it truly belonged.

Drakulich was still working with limited funds at that point, yet he was trying to upgrade the program. Each year he kept improving the schedule and as enrollment on campus grew and the team began to win more, the community became increasingly interested.

“People wanted to get involved,” Drakulich said. “We formed a booster club to raise money. People who owned restaurants gave our players meals because we didn’t have dorms. We were also able to get our players jobs, which was a thing you could do back then.”

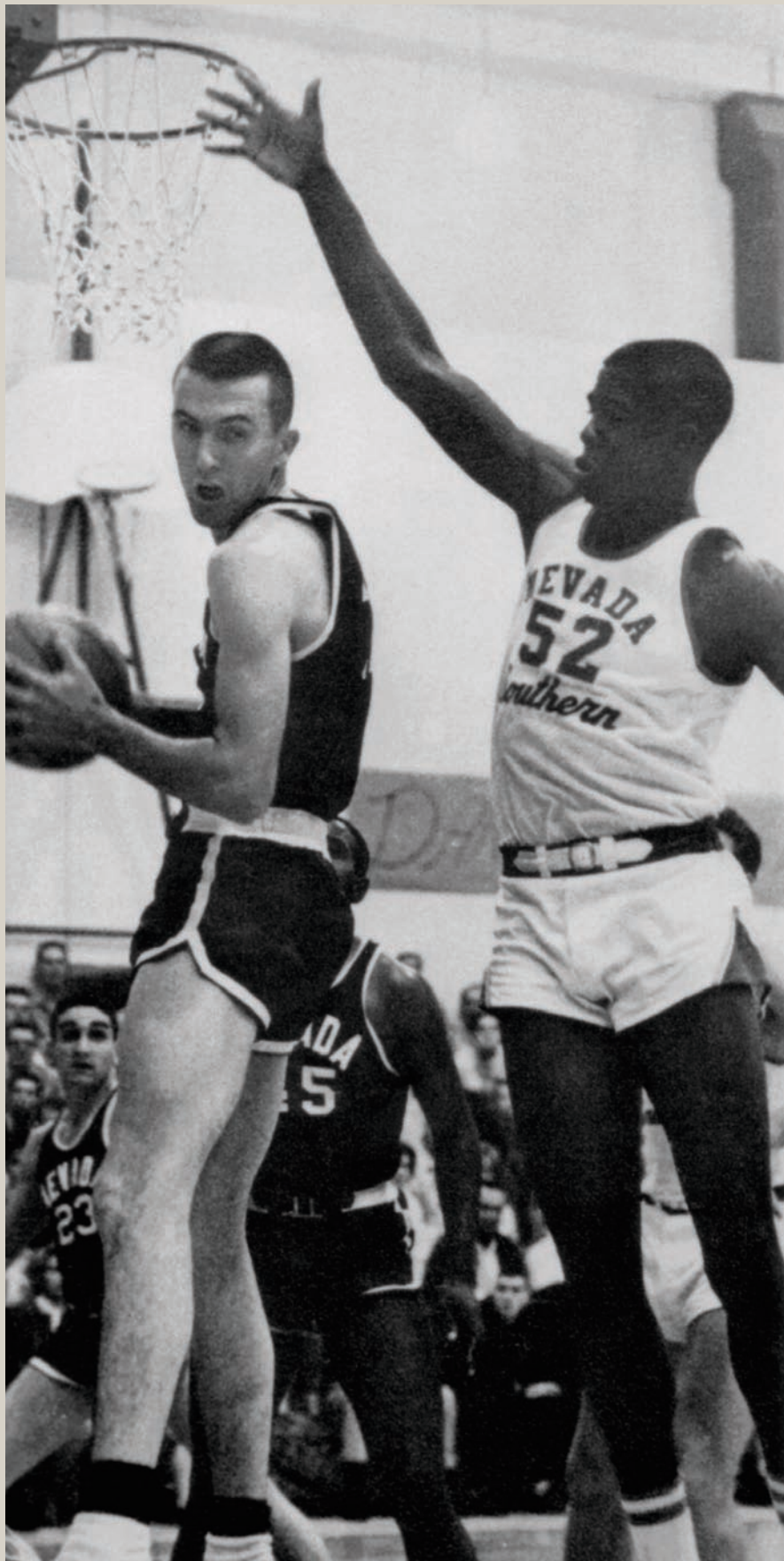
By 1962, Drakulich, who was also the athletic director, started looking at widening the scope of Rebel athletics. He began a baseball program and was looking to add golf and tennis. He also began looking for an assistant. He also was sensing that his future was more of an administrator

than as a coach and began looking for a successor. “I always felt that once I got it going, someone else would take it from there,” Drakulich said. “We knew the direction we wanted to go, which was to have a program like the one up north.”



Defense has always been a staple of UNLV basketball.

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1 Silas Stepp, the first great Rebel, defending.  
 2 Drakulich passes the torch to Brad Rothermel in 1981. 3 UNLV players have always enjoyed a close relationship with the fans. 4 Michael "Chub" Drakulich, the founding father of Rebel basketball, remained UNLV's athletic director until 1978.

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