

PAT RILEY Biography

Suave, handsome, intense yet apparently unflappable, Pat Riley is probably the most celebrated basketball coach in the world. "Riles," who wears his lucrative celebrity as easily as he does his Armani suits, is also one of the most successful.

Riley brought Showtime to the Los Angeles Lakers and won four NBA Championships, then built both the New York Knicks and the Miami Heat into title contenders and hot tickets in the 1990s. He is the by far the winningest coach in playoff history with 155 postseason victories to his credit going into the 1999-2000 season.

In regular-season action, he stands second to Lenny Wilkens (1,179) on the all-time list - Miami's first victory of the 2000-2001 season will be the 1,000th of Riley's career.

In nine remarkable seasons as the head coach of the Lakers, Riley took his club to the NBA Finals seven times and came away with four championships, including back-to-back titles in 1987 and 1988 - something the NBA hadn't seen in two decades.

No NBA coach ever won 500 games more quickly. He left the Lakers with a regular-season record of 533-194 and a regular-season winning percentage of .733. In the playoffs, he led the Lakers to a 102-47 record and a .685 winning percentage. Both marks were NBA records at the time.

"He's inventive. He makes good, quick decisions in games," former Lakers General Manager Jerry West told Sports Illustrated in 1985. "He has the faith of the team and the knowledge to design an offense for the players and not the coach. He has tremendous belief in himself and his sense of his role here. He [has] the perfect temperament."

After leaving the Lakers and spending a season as a broadcaster for NBC, Riley returned to coaching in New York, where he led the Knicks to their best seasons in more than two decades. In 1994 the Knicks played for an NBA title for the first time since 1973, losing to the Houston Rockets in seven games.

After the Knicks were eliminated by Indiana in the Eastern Conference Semifinals in 1995, Riley resigned with one year remaining on his contract and accepted a lucrative offer from the Miami Heat to become part-owner as well as head coach. The Knicks contested his hiring, and Miami agreed to send a first-round draft pick and cash to New York as settlement.

In his first season with the Heat, Riley set about revamping the roster, making a host of moves that totally changed the look of the team and also cleared the way for future free agent signings. In the meantime, he maintained his record of never posting a losing record or failing to make the playoffs as Miami, now featuring Alonzo Mourning at center and Tim Hardaway at point guard, finished at 42-40 and gained the last Eastern Conference playoff spot.

Since then, Riley has guided the Heat to four consecutive Atlantic Division titles. He got tremendous mileage from unheralded players such as P.J. Brown, Voshon Lenard and Isaac Austin in 1996-97 as the Heat won a franchise-record 61 games before bowing to the eventual champion Chicago Bulls in the Conference Finals. In each of the past three seasons, despite dominant performances in the regular season, Miami has been eliminated by New York in the playoffs in what has become the NBA's most intense rivalry.

Each year Riley has tinkered with Miami's roster, maneuvering within the constraints of the salary cap to try and find the right pieces to fit around mainstays Mourning and Hardaway, creating the combination that will carry the Heat to its first NBA Finals berth. Prior to the 200-2001 season, Riley swung deals with Charlotte for All-Star guard Eddie Jones.

His success extends beyond the court. One of the most sought after motivational speakers in the country, he is the author of the best-selling book, "The Winner Within: A Life Plan for Team Players." His million-dollar firm Riley & Company has promoted a video game and a motivational video, and has cut deals that included a responsible drinking campaign for Miller Brewing Company.

The years he has spent in the media centers of Los Angeles and New York have helped Riley to shape his image and hone his message, but it was in the roughneck, blue-collar environs of Schenectady, N.Y. that he learned some of his best lessons about the quest for perfection and the motivation of men.

The son of a strict Catholic homemaker and a one-time minor league baseball manager (who had made it to the big leagues for 12 at bats with the war-time Philadelphia Phillies), Riley quickly developed a reputation for confidence, leadership, and street smarts.

The budding athlete competed in football, basketball, baseball and track, and showed his toughness as far back as 1962, according to high school teammate Paul Heiner. Midway through a basketball game, Riley took an elbow to the face that knocked out a tooth. "Pat walked to where the tooth was and kicked it off the court. And we kept playing," Heiner told writer Bill Pennington. "He couldn't be distracted from the game ... That was Pat."

Riley was a high school quarterback who loved to call his own number, especially on short runs for touchdowns. But as it turned out, it was Riley's sibling, Lee, who was the football star of the family. Lee eventually played five seasons in the National Football League and one in the American Football League. Pat's high school basketball coach was Walt Przybylo, a disciplinarian and motivator who was like a surrogate father to him. Przybylo was also a master motivator and an advocate of fast-break basketball, a rarity at the high school level in the early 1960s.

In 1963 Riley turned down an offer to play football for Bear Bryant at Alabama, deciding instead to play basketball for Adolph Rupp at Kentucky. Riley became a member of "Rupp's Runts" (no one on the team was taller 6-5), the team that lost the 1966 NCAA championship game to Texas Western. Riley was known for his feather-soft jumper, his prodigious fouling (he committed more fouls than any other three-year player in Kentucky history), and his guile, best demonstrated by the 50 straight center jumps he won in 1965-66, almost always against taller players. He averaged 22.0 points as a junior and then 17.4 as a senior in 1966-67.

The expansion San Diego Rockets selected Riley with the seventh overall pick in the 1967 NBA Draft. Riley averaged 7.9 points as a rookie in 1967-68, playing a reserve role that would become familiar over the course of his nine-year playing career. In his second year Riley shifted from forward to guard, improved his scoring average to 8.8 points per game, and tore up his knee, the first of several injuries he would suffer during his career. After appearing in just 36 games in 1969-70, Riley was left unprotected by the Rockets in the 1970 NBA Expansion Draft. He was selected by the Portland Trail Blazers but was then sold to the Lakers before the 1970-71 season.

Riley spent the next five-plus seasons as a reserve for Los Angeles, becoming part of the famed "Pine Brothers" on the Lakers' bench. He appeared in 67 games during the Lakers' magical 1971-72 season, in which the team won a record 33 straight games at one point, finished with a 69-13 mark and romped to the NBA Championship. It would be Riley's only title as a player.

With the careers of Wilt Chamberlain and Jerry West winding down, Riley had his most productive seasons in 1973-74 and 1974-75, averaging 9.5 and 11.0 points, respectively. After two games with Los Angeles to start the 1975-76 season, Riley was traded to Phoenix, where he ended his playing days as he had begun them, as a hard-working reserve.

After one year Riley was back in basketball, broadcasting Lakers games alongside the legendary Chick Hearn. Early in the 1979-80 campaign, Lakers Coach Jack McKinney was seriously injured in a bicycle accident and had to step down. He was replaced by Assistant Coach Paul Westhead, who asked Riley to become his assistant, and so Riley became a part of the team that won the NBA title that season.

The 1980-81 Lakers suffered a shocking first-round elimination at the hands of Houston, and 11 games into the 1981-82 season, Lakers brass felt the team needed to take a new direction. Friction between Magic Johnson and Westhead and impatience with Westhead's half-court offense set the scene for Riley to take over as head coach on Nov. 19, 1981. "I was numb," he said at the time. "I thought the firing was terrible."

Riley installed a running offense and the Lakers responded by winning 17 of the next 20 games and finished the season at 57-25. In the playoffs they swept both Phoenix and San Antonio before knocking off Philadelphia in six games to give Riley a championship ring in his first season as head coach.

For the next eight years, Riley's Lakers teams were regulars in the NBA Finals. It was during that time that he developed what he called "TI," his fits of temporary insanity. According to his book "The Winner Within," effective TI involves "being angry at the right time to the right degree, at the right people.... It requires a focused plan, and it demands a rapid follow-up of compassion to prevent lasting damage."

Friend and movie director Robert Towne described one such outburst for Sports Illustrated. It came after a loss to San Antonio in which the players spent a timeout watching Dancing Barry instead of paying attention as Riley diagrammed a play in the closing minutes. "In comes a man with a tray of about 40 Cokes.... [Riley] sweeps his arm across the tray and sprays Coke and ice all over, including Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's seven feet of new suit. And Riley has the satisfaction, while he makes his case for how terrible they are, of being able to crunch around, grinding the ice cubes into the carpet."

It was in L.A. that Riley also developed his penchant for slick suits. "Dress is a decorum I have to keep as a coach," he told writer Kenny Moore. "My first year I was slacks, coat, tie, very soft. Then it began to change to more authority, and suits."

The Lakers made it back to the Finals each of the next two seasons, but they were swept by Philadelphia in 1983 and then edged by Boston in seven games in 1984. Finally, in 1985, the Lakers reclaimed the title by beating the Celtics in six games. The victory was one of the most satisfying achievements of Riley's career. Up to that point, Boston had won all eight NBA Finals matchups against the Lakers. Riley was determined to motivate his players, disarm the Celtics "mystique," and come away with another ring. He did.

The Lakers were humming on all cylinders by 1984-85. With a fast-breaking, "Showtime" attack, Los Angeles posted a remarkable .545 team field-goal percentage for the season, an all-time NBA record. The Lakers boasted an imposing lineup of past, present, and future stars that included Abdul-Jabbar, Johnson, James Worthy, Byron Scott, Michael Cooper, Bob McAdoo, Jamaal Wilkes, and the popular Kurt Rambis.

The Lakers were upset by Houston in the Conference Finals in 1986, so Riley found a new way to get the best out of his players. At the start of the 1986-87 season, he unveiled a program called Career Best Effort (CBE). In contrast with previous methods of ranking players, which had compared them to their teammates, CBE compared them to opponents at the same position. Each player had a category in which he could potentially rank first. Moderate, sustained improvement was the key. The system even measured such elements as shot contesting. It spurred several players, most notably A. C. Green and Magic Johnson (league MVP that year), who turned in career seasons. Riley compiled his best mark as a coach at 65-17. The Lakers swept through the playoffs and then handled Boston in six games to win their fourth championship of the decade.

One of the most dramatic events of Riley's career occurred in 1987, just after the Lakers had dispatched Boston. Amid popping champagne corks, Riley was asked if he thought the team could do it again. Riley guaranteed a repeat championship, and he repeated his assertion the next day at a victory parade. "For 19 years, every NBA champion had been a one-hit wonder," Riley wrote in "The Winner Within." "None had withstood the pressure of winning back-to-back championships.... I wanted the Lakers to feel the pressure right away, to spend their offseason deciding they would shoulder the responsibility."

"We didn't even get a chance to enjoy the one we'd won," remembered Michael Cooper in the Boston Globe.

Riley's brash gamble paid off. The 1987-88 Lakers were awesome, rolling to a league-best 62-20 record. Magic Johnson, with 858 assists, was the only Lakers player to crack the top 10 in any offensive category. What the Lakers excelled at was a Riley hallmark: meshing as a team. Seven players averaged 11.0 points or better. Eight players pulled down 200 or more rebounds.

After blanking San Antonio in the first round of the playoffs, Los Angeles ran into some tough sledding but prevailed in seven games against first Utah and then Dallas. In a predictably rough finale against Detroit, the Lakers and the Pistons split the first six games. "Before the final game," wrote Riley, "I told the Lakers that Detroit was after a championship, but we were after something bigger: a place in history." Los Angeles prevailed, 108-105, in Game 7 as Riley and his team delivered on his guarantee—the Lakers were repeat champions.

In 1988-89 the Lakers again won their division and swept through the Western Conference playoffs, winning 11 straight games before losing Johnson and Scott to injuries and going winless in the Finals against Detroit. In Riley's last season with the Lakers, 1989-90, he put up his second-best record as a coach, 63-19. But the Lakers were bounced from the conference semifinals by the Phoenix Suns. Ironically, it wasn't until that season that Riley earned his first NBA Coach of the Year Award.

After leaving the Lakers, Riley spent a year working for NBC before joining the Knicks, who had not won a championship since 1973. On May 1, 1991, he took the job and got right to work. Riley began by challenging Patrick Ewing and Charles Oakley to help build an unselfish core for the team, and he sold them on grueling preparation.

The challenge was greater in New York than Riley had faced with the talented Lakers. Only Ewing ranked among the league's best players at his position. Results came quickly, however. In 1991-92 the Knicks finished 51-31, beat Detroit in the first round of the playoffs, and then lost in seven games to Chicago, which went on to win the championship for the second year in a row.

The next year the Knicks improved to 60-22, which tied Riley with Red Holzman for the best record in franchise history. Riley did a masterful coaching job that season, molding a group that included seven new faces into a winning unit. At season's end, he edged Houston's Rudy Tomjanovich by one vote for the NBA Coach of the Year Award, but the Knicks again lost to Chicago in the playoffs.

The 1993-94 campaign saw Riley take the Knicks the farthest they had been in 21 years, all the way to the NBA Finals. New York finally got past Chicago, eliminating the Bulls in seven games in the Eastern Conference Semifinals, then survived a scare against the Indiana Pacers in the Conference Finals. In a hard-fought, low-scoring series, the Knicks took a 3-2 lead over the Houston Rockets but could not close it out, losing the last two games in Houston and the championship.

In 1994-95, the Knicks posted a 55-27 record under Riley, but were eliminated in the Eastern Conference Semifinals by the Indiana Pacers. Riley resigned as head coach soon after, closing the second-most successful era in New York Knicks history. It also marked the opening of a new chapter for Riley, the building of the Miami Heat.

In one season, Riley overhauled the Miami roster. Only one player who was with the team at the end of 1994-95, reserve swingman Keith Askins, survived till the end of 1995-96. A total of 22 players wore the Miami uniform in 1995-96, with the major newcomers being center Alonzo Mourning from Charlotte and point guard Tim Hardaway from Golden State, the players who would form the team's foundation.

Despite the turnover, the Heat managed to make the playoffs with a 42-40 mark. Miami was on the rise, and would win the Atlantic Division in each of the next four seasons. The playoffs, however, were another matter, as Miami was ousted by Chicago in 1997 and by New York in each of the following three seasons.

After five seasons, Riley's Miami cup remains half-filled. The team has dominated the Atlantic Division during the regular season, qualifying for the playoffs every year, and pro basketball has never been hotter in South Florida. But the ultimate prize, the NBA Championship, has proven to be elusive as the Heat has

been stopped short of a berth in the NBA Finals every year. The fact that the team doing the stopping in each of the past three seasons has been the team Riley formerly coached, the New York Knicks, has been especially galling to the man considered the pre-eminent coach in the game today. And it has spurred him to redouble his efforts to bring a first NBA title to Miami.