

# Thought Leader Spotlight

March 2016

As part of The Azara Group's monthly newsletter, we select a business leader to share insights about leadership, being an influencer, and career development. Our objective is to help support your ability to flourish as a leader and share what makes people thrive in business.

## Marvin Menzies

*Head Men's Basketball Coach  
New Mexico State University*

**Education:** Cal. State Univ., Sacramento (M.A. in Education)  
UC Los Angeles (B.A. in Economics)

**Previously With:** University of Louisville  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV)  
University of Southern California (USC)  
San Diego State University  
Santa Monica Community College  
Hamilton High School

**Interesting Details:** Started coaching career volunteering at his high school; has 64% winning percentage with 198 wins to 111 losses in 9 years of collegiate-level head coaching; 3-time Western Athletic Conference (WAC) Regular Season Champion; 5-time WAC Tournament Champion; five NCAA Tournament "March Madness" appearances; one National Invitation Tournament (NIT) appearance; 2015 WAC Coach of the Year; coached under Hall of Famer Rick Pitino; did not play basketball in college; worked in a series of industries before becoming a full-time coach; grew up in Los Angeles, CA.



### 1. What attracted you to your chosen field and profession?

When I was a student at UCLA, I volunteered for the Special Olympics. It was heart-wrenching and emotionally draining because it was hard to see kids with challenges. Special Education teachers are gifts to the planet – they're patient and have the emotional stability to do difficult work. This experience encouraged my volunteerism.

I started volunteering as a coach at my old high school. First, I was assigned to track and field and the lower level football team. Then, I began coaching the B-level and C-level basketball teams. Eventually, I became a junior varsity and varsity coach. Wanting to become a better coach, I studied the game, went to basketball clinics, and networked with good coaches. I love basketball. It was a way to connect with kids, competition, and giving back.

When I started, I was 20 years old. I never envisioned my passions would morph into an actual career. I wasn't making any money and was just doing it "on the side." When I started getting paid, I barely made \$15K per year. Before becoming a full-time coach, I had other jobs in many industries. I had a bakery and a limo company, worked for the LA County Fire Department, did a stint at a bond company backing Hollywood films, and had a party promotions business – giving a platform to comedians like Jamie Foxx and D.L. Hughley at the start of their careers.

I was always searching for my niche – not realizing I was already in it coaching basketball. My path is untraditional. I never played in college. But my love of the game and my service and leadership mentality led me to becoming a championship-winning coach.

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## 2. What person, opportunity, or game-changing moment had the biggest impact on your career?

There were two pivotal opportunities that were career game-changers. The first was when Coach John McMullen offered me a position at Santa Monica Community College. He saw how I interacted with the kids and respected my work. I still wasn't able to be a full-time coach, but it opened doors. It allowed me to teach classes so I could make more money. At SMCC, I was more visible and could get noticed.

The second game-changer led to a critical career shift. This was when Coach Steve Fisher offered me an assistant coaching position at San Diego State. Finally, I could be a full-time coach and no longer had to hustle with additional jobs to make ends meet. I worked so hard it didn't feel like work. Many nights I just sleep at the office. I loved the grind, and enjoyed the chase and challenge. It allowed me to present more of what I had to offer as a coach.

I wanted the best for the kids and brought my own recruiting style. I wasn't just about "sales pitches" to land hot recruits. I didn't want to be "that guy" who brought in a kid only to forget about his experience once on campus. I wanted to do right by the players, and believed in what I pitched to new recruits. I cared and still care. I've been successful since I'm honest. I came into my own as a coach and recruiter of top athletic talent because Coaches McMullen and Fisher cleared a path to walk through, and later Coach Rick Pitino paved my way to rise to Head Coach.

## 3. What is the biggest challenge you faced professionally? How did you overcome it?

Transitioning from being an assistant to head coach was challenging. At first, people had an impression that I was only a great recruiter and less of an "X's and O's" guy who's a capable coach. It's hard to change perceptions of who you are. I started speaking at clinics, engaging more in intellectual conversation about the sport, and expanded my knowledge base. I chipped away at this – I didn't want to be put in a box that didn't apply to me.

But mainly, I've done it by winning. After nine years with almost 200 wins as a head coach, the results speak for my performance and skills. Since becoming New Mexico State's head coach, we've gone to five NCAA Championship Tournaments, are 5-time WAC Tournament Champions, and last year I was the 2015 WAC Coach of the Year. I also have great staff with a solid success recipe.

There was also a second big challenge I faced as a head coach. Never before did I have to manage people. I was always a co-worker. As a supervisor, people turn to you for guidance and to set an example. The management piece was difficult in my first two years. I had to figure out my own leadership style since I wasn't trained to be the boss of adults. I started researching how to be a better leader and manager – I watched Ted Talks, read about being a manager, networked, and leaned on my mentors and past bosses to get advice. I was able to develop my own leadership philosophy by not being too proud to admit I needed help. I reinvented myself as a leader to succeed.

## 4. What tools or tactics do you rely on in being a more effective leader and team member?

I'm fortunate to have worked with great coaches – some are in the Hall of Fame, or played or coached in the NBA. Coaching under Rick Pitino, Steve Fisher, Lon Kruger, Henry Bibby, and John McMullen didn't just teach me about coaching. They're mentors and always available to offer advice. They've helped shape me as a leader and manager.

Learning from others has allowed me to better develop my own philosophy. No matter what, it's important for me to still "be me." I see myself as the CEO of a small corporation with 10 to 11 employees reporting to me. There are also student-athletes, managers, trainers, graduate assistants, support staff, and strength and conditioning people. We all play a key part – with each person serving an important function on the team. There's a hierarchy with me at the head since I'm to blame for losses and mistakes, but I don't micromanage. When they look to me, they see I'm diligent and empower them while requiring accountability. My goal is to lead without losing people's passions.

I've learned leading requires being flexible and adapting. It can't just be about what matters to me since that results in failure. You have to balance what's important to your staff to maximize their efforts for collective success. I also had to realize that people don't see their job the way I do as the head coach or even how I saw myself when I was in their shoes as an assistant coach. I got into coaching because I'm passionate about the sport and shaping young people's lives. You have to understand what drives your team and why they chose their profession to function as a cohesive unit – from the grad assistant to assistant coach.

**5. Share a story about an interesting or difficult negotiation and how you were able to gain more influence and leverage as a result.**

When I was a new head coach, I had to navigate a staff that sometimes engaged in divisive and toxic behavior. Several staff members routinely brought their complaints about their colleagues to me. They were throwing each other under the bus. I was also meshing legacy staff with people I hired and brought with me. Different people were vying for my loyalty while being disloyal to each other. I listened to them, but I was increasingly concerned by the lack of interdepartmental chemistry. I wanted people to directly negotiate their own conflicts. If they came to me, I wanted them to propose solutions and not just present problems.

My solution to quash this behavior was to create an open forum for discussion. I masked this by organizing a retreat to discuss important issues impacting the basketball team – including my leadership philosophy and team procedures. This was my strategy to encourage working more effectively together, but also to limit how much my staff put on my plate instead of unburdening me. I needed to focus on creating a winning basketball team and not petty squabbles. I believe in loyalty, hard work, and a team that makes my job easier.

I was able to bring this challenge to the surface without making a big deal out of it. I negotiated a solution for myself by addressing things in a non-threatening way. In the end, everyone but one person got it. Eventually, I had to let him go. But I gained more leverage and influence with my staff. I earned more respect and there was less conflict. I believe in the power of team retreats and getting away from the office. I do a few each year.

**6. What do you see as your unique value proposition and how has your personal background prepared you to excel?**

Not having played basketball in college or the pros sets me apart in this profession. And being a black Division I head coach is quite rare. I approach the sport out of a pure love and passion for the game, athletes, and core values that sports can teach you. As a coach, I tap into what it means to be on a team and embrace the journey for the journey's sake. Yes, I want to win and am competitive by nature, but I see the big picture as I'm molding young people's lives. I want my athletes to win on the court and win at what they do when they stop playing.

I try to motivate the players by getting them to channel why they started playing in the first place – similar to why I love the sport. They need to bring passion to succeed on the court and in life. Being a student-athlete can be a grind and I want them to enjoy it. I know I'm transforming kids into young men and future contributors to society.

I got into coaching as a volunteer and it has impacted my coaching philosophy. I require my players to do community service. Collectively, we have over 900 hours of volunteerism. This allows me to give back as a head coach, but allows them to feel the power of service beyond oneself. My coaching involves an ethical and moral component, and often my team wins the community service award in the athletic department.

**7. What is your proudest achievement?**

Professionally, I'm most proud when my student-athletes graduate. Each one who graduates is important. It's a milestone in their lives. Last year, four seniors and one manager graduated. This is really why I do what I do. I'm not in this just to have a big house or to reach the Final Four in the NCAA Championships. Winning is wonderful, and I love and welcome victories. But that's not my end game. I'm proud each year when my kids accept their college diplomas in front of their families. Over 90% of my athletes who start and end with me play professionally on some level. But their degree helps them later in life.

Each graduation is a win for me and them in the game of life.