

UNLV Basketball Notebook: Kruger 'Playbook' set for release

By Rob Miech



Tue, Oct 7, 2008 (2 a.m.) Rob Miech

D.J. Allen, 33, helped UNLV basketball coach Lon Kruger write a book that has a soft release date of Oct. 15. Allen has operated a Las Vegas public relations agency for nine years.

It started when D.J. Allen, as a fan, thanked Lon Kruger for coming to Las Vegas on the Thomas & Mack Center court shortly after one of the UNLV basketball coach's first victories.

Their relationship grew, Kruger enlisted Allen's public relations agency, Imagine Marketing, to promote the Rebels and they combined their talents to write Kruger's

first book.

"The Xs and Os of Success: A Playbook for Leaders in Business and Life" is scheduled to be released by Stephens Press next Wednesday.

"My favorite comment anyone said about reading the manuscript was, 'It felt like I was having a nice conversation with Lon Kruger, like I was just sitting there talking with one of the best college basketball coaches in the nation,'" said Allen, 33.

"After hearing that, I thought, maybe we are doing something right."

They hatched the idea for the 270-page book after the Rebels advanced to the Sweet 16 in April 2007, for the first time since 1991.

For three months, three or four times a week, they met for two to three hours a night at the PT's Pub on Eastern and St. Rose Parkway.

They sat in a quiet corner. Kruger would order a salad, quesadillas or pancakes. He always drinks water.

Although so much of his career is about basketball, business principles and practices have always intrigued Kruger.

Allen, a Las Vegas native who has had UNLV basketball season tickets for years, is all about business, but he loves sports.

The more they talked, the more they realized how the ingredients of a successful business and a successful sports organization mirror each other. They highlighted leadership philosophies and strategies.

“The conversations were so easy, yet so insightful,” Allen said. “I could feel myself growing so much during that time. It was an amazing experience for me as a businessman and a young father.”

Kruger was adamant about meeting around 8 p.m., or whenever Allen and his wife, Stacey, had put their two young children to bed.

A book deal is usually made in advance with a publisher. Terms are arranged with an agent. Deadlines are set.

Kruger and Allen did it upside down, taking time to do it right. They were doing it for themselves. If a publisher came along, fine.

“We did it completely backwards,” Allen said. “But we were enjoying the process of getting what was in our heads down on paper – that was our true reward.”

Kruger underwent sextuple heart-bypass surgery in August 2007.

“We became closer friends after that,” Allen said. “I realized just how much my time with coach had impacted me. He had become my coach, my mentor.

“I was evolving as a person because of his lessons. It was important to me to get those lessons out to others because there is something we can all take from the teachings.”

In August, at the Stan Fulton Gaming Center on the UNLV campus, Kruger spoke for the first time -- to a group of local business leaders -- using an outline of the book on an overhead projector.

Dressed in dark gray slacks, a pink-striped dress shirt and a black blazer, he talked about trust and loyalty, recruiting the right people, being consistent and fair, creating a team and communication.

“It’s not what I say, it’s what they hear,” Kruger said. “If they didn’t hear it, it’s my responsibility.”

“We want to create an environment in which they want to arrive early and stay late.”

“If you’re consistent and fair, they’ll run through a wall for you.”

Kruger will speak again on those topics at a Fulton Center function Sunday from 6 to 9 p.m.

“It was a lot of fun putting it together,” Kruger said. “The best part was reliving a lot of those memories, especially early, like teachings from my mom and dad. It’s always good to relive those feelings.”

By the time practice started a year ago, hoops were consuming Kruger, many of the lessons were written and Allen tightened the manuscript for a couple of months.

He talked with Kruger’s former teammates and players to give the book a personal touch. The publisher chose not to use many of those stories, although learning more about Kruger was invaluable to Allen.

He delivered the first edition of the manuscript with a mock cover -- the initial stage of the final phase -- to Kruger on Christmas Eve.

“That is when it became real to us,” Allen said. “It had a look. We could hold it and feel it.”

Feedback in ensuing weeks was overwhelmingly positive.

Allen has been polishing the final edits of the book over the past few weeks.

“It’s been a life-changing experience for me,” Allen said. “I look at life completely different today than I did 18 months ago because of his teachings. I am much more comfortable about who I am and my priorities.

“As one of his former teammates told me, Lon Kruger is the most secure human being I know. He doesn’t focus on self-promotion. He focuses on performance. That’s an example all of us can learn from.”

Lon Kruger gives some lessons on leadership UNLV basketball coach talks to business leaders

By Rob Miech



Fri, Aug 15, 2008 (4:47 p.m.) Rob Miech

UNLV basketball coach Lon Kruger poses at a phone book recycling function this summer at the Thomas & Mack Center. Since taking over the program four years ago, Kruger has been very visible, promoting his team and UNLV athletics, in and around Las Vegas.

Friday morning, he was the opening speaker at a gathering of about 150 professionals at the Stan Fulton Building on the UNLV campus.

Lon Kruger will only be crossed once.

“If someone lies to me, I’ll never believe him again,” he said. “You can’t. There isn’t a degree here. You can’t rationalize it. You can’t, you simply can’t.”

The CEO of UNLV basketball looked and sounded as comfortable addressing about 150 business leaders Friday morning as he is before his players.

Twice, a microphone malfunctioned, nearly splitting eardrums with a high-pitched wail in a conference room in the Stan Fulton Building on UNLV’s campus.

No matter. Kruger coolly handed it off and proceeded without it or a megaphone. Good thing it wasn’t the middle of the season.

He was the opening speaker for a Management Survival Class and deftly conveyed how managing a basketball team is no different than running a company or a sales team.

Along the way, he provided some insight into what, and who, shaped his style and philosophy, what he expects of others, and what they can always expect of him and his staff.

Kruger followed a PowerPoint presentation that will be the foundation of a book he is writing, with publicist D.J. Allen, about leadership. It should be out in October.

The conference was sponsored by In Business Las Vegas, a sister Greenspun Media Group publication of the Las Vegas Sun

It might not have been advantageous to follow Kruger, which was the task of keynote speaker Justin Zappulla, whose theme was Coaching for Sales Performance.

Zappulla hasn't won any games lately in the NCAA tournament.

Kruger, who turns 56 on Tuesday, has polished his public-speaking skills considerably since he first met with students in middle and high schools around Kansas 35 years ago, when he played at Kansas State.

He talked about those days Friday, but in the context of leadership. They were some of his most candid comments about legendary Wildcats coach Jack Hartman, a harsh disciplinarian.

"I played for a coach who absolutely motivated out of fear," Kruger said. "No one enjoyed going to practice. No one looked forward to it. Everyone was scared.

"He was a great coach. He got great results. I had a great relationship with him and learned a great deal from him, but that wasn't me. We're kind of the other extreme."

To create a rich learning environment in which players want to arrive early for practice and stay late, Kruger, and assistants Steve Henson, Greg Gensing, Lew Hill and Mike Shepherd, are guided by a golden rule.

"Is that how I would like to be treated?" Kruger said. "And what is it that I would want from my leader, my boss, my coach? It's not so much about what I say but what they hear. Sometimes we get confused.

"Motivate them in their best interest and they'll run through a wall for you."

Being consistent and fair develops trust. Kruger tells his players that they determine who starts and reserve roles. All we do, he tells them, is evaluate what they do every day.

Integrity goes without saying, he said. He implored young coaches not to cheat or lie, two of the few rules that Kruger's late father, Don, taught him and his siblings.

"There's a lot of cheating in college sports, probably a lot of cheating in business," Kruger said. "I can't imagine a worse feeling than cheating to get a player, then worrying for four years that someone might find out.

"I can't understand how someone could stand up before 15 players and talk about life skills and character, about being honest, if two or three of them are saying, 'You cheated to get me. What are you talking about?'"

Communication is vital to the foundation, Kruger said, but in the proper way. He never wants to be cursed at, humiliated or embarrassed, and his players know they'll never be in that position.

Kruger has an 80-20 rule, about the ratio of positive reinforcement to constructive criticism, that he instructs his coaches to use.

That's why Kruger blames himself after defeats and praises his players after victories.

"Maybe that's a little boring at press conference, perhaps," he said. "But I don't see any reason to say anything negative."

Kruger is always quick with a handshake or warm greeting.

"Set the tone," he said. "Leave people feeling special. Do that and people will want to be around you. They look forward to being around you. That's a good quality to have.

"It's just as easy to say something good to people, compliment them, say thank you, as it is being critical. It won't take more time. It may take more thought."

After speaking for a half hour, Kruger fielded questions for 15 minutes.

That ill-fated stint coaching the Atlanta Hawks was rough, he said. Once, when the Hawks arrived in Detroit in the wee hours, the bus rolled up to the hotel, and a few players rolled out into waiting limousines.

Kruger just looked at his assistants.

"I don't think they'd do that in college," he said. The room laughed.

"Losing got old fast. It was a great experience ... and we got fired. That's a good thing sometimes. I thought we'd go down there and fix it. It was humbling."

Kruger has a penchant for never saying "I." It's always "we," as in, him and wife Barb.

Although she might not like to hear that, when he was asked about combating a bad day, he said, "Barb might have prepared a bad breakfast."

Again, laughs.

"I don't get stressed out about too many things that are out of my control," Kruger said. "You can't change it."

They laughed again when he talked about taking over a Florida program that was facing NCAA sanctions and was being investigated by the FBI.

At UNLV, he said, he inherited a solid program. There are no tricks to success. You just need patience and good people.

A conference room of executives and business owners digested the message.

Robert Martin, a 49-year-old manager at the Bank of New York/Mellon Wealth Management, wished he had brought some of his salesmen to hear Kruger's insight.

"One of the most impressive things about Lon is his visibility in the community," Martin said. "Jerry Tarkanian got great results, but he wasn't as giving with his time.

"Lon is so good at it. I don't think he did a lot of rehearsing, either. It was from the heart. I could listen to him for hours."

Creating his own buzz

Ron Kantowski finds an answer in Lon Kruger's contract for why the coach is taking on team PR

By [Ron Kantowski](#)



Steve Marcus

UNLV men's basketball coach Lon Kruger has agreed to add marketing to his job description. His contract, up for approval next week, includes a plan for sharing ticket revenue that may offset his out-of-pocket promotional expenses.

Beyond the Sun

- [CoachKruger.com](#)
- [UNLV Rebels Basketball: Lon Kruger](#)

A few weeks ago Lon Kruger, the Swiss Army Knife of the UNLV athletic department, added another blade to the screwdriver, wire stripper and corkscrew. He took over the marketing duties of his own program.

Why would the coach have to market a team that went to the Sweet 16 two years ago and matched national champion Kansas basket for basket in the first half of a second-round game this year? Because the people at UNLV hired to do that job were as clueless as Alicia Silverstone.

Not coincidentally, once Kruger hired his own PR guy and launched the beta version of CoachKruger.com on the Internet, interest in the basketball program seemed to grow like a lead at Colorado State. Dozens of spectators began showing up to watch practice — in June — before the Rebels embarked on their tour of Australia.

How palpable was the buzz about UNLV hoops? Well, there were unconfirmed reports that Cheech Marin inquired about season tickets.

OK, maybe there would have been a buzz anyway, even if the UNLV marketing department was slow to recognize that the slumbering giant, or at least giant-killer (ask second-seeded Wisconsin in 2006), had awakened under Kruger's watch. Rebels fans

were watching on TV and nobody had to tell them what to do. They jumped on the basketball bandwagon with both feet.

But any way you look at it, Kruger is responsible. With an assist from Wink Adams and his teammates.

That's why I thought he was nuts when he started paying out of his own pocket to market the program.

When I saw his amended contract, which will go before the Board of Regents for approval next week, I thought he was a little less nuts.

For starters, he'll get a one-year rollover on his contract with bumps in base salary (from \$265,000 in 2011 to \$280,000 in 2012), media appearances (from \$440,000 to \$453,000), public appearances (from \$370,000 to \$382,500) plus his standard \$50,000 shoe and apparel contract that locks him up for five more years here.

That may seem like a lot of money, and it is, especially for a university that doesn't have two nickels to rub together. But when you consider that basketball and motorcycle races and rock concerts at Sam Boyd Stadium are what prop up the rest of the UNLV athletic program, it's money well spent.

More interesting is Section 2.02g of Kruger's amended 35-page contract — a ticket revenue sharing plan that could enable him to recoup some of the money he's shelling out for CoachKruger.com and that other promotional stuff.

Here's how the official Board of Regents briefing paper reads:

“Lon Kruger is one of the most marketable head men's basketball coaches in the country and the retention of Lon Kruger is of utmost importance. Through contractual negotiations, Lon, and Director of Athletics, Mike Hamrick, agreed on an incentive revenue ticket sharing program that would allow Lon to market and promote the men's basketball program and share in ticket revenues. Given the financial climate, it was a mutually agreed (upon) incentive package that gives Lon the flexibility to generate additional compensation without significantly impacting the athletic department budget.”

So here's how it works: After setting a base revenue projection based on total ticket sales, revenue generated above and beyond that dollar figure will go back to Kruger. He'll get 100 percent of the revenue up to \$400,000 above the base revenue projection, 50 percent from \$401,000 up to \$800,000, and 75 percent of ticket revenue over \$800,000 above the agreed-on number.

What it means in average basketball fan terms: For Kruger to receive \$200,000, the Rebels will have to sell 610 more tickets per game than last year. For him to receive

\$400,000, the Rebels will have to increase attendance by 1,220 tickets per game, and so forth.

Last year, the Rebels sold 152,979 tickets for 19 home games. They have sold 101,934 tickets for next season.

The briefing paper lists five bullet points for why the contract extension and the ticket revenue sharing plan should receive the ol' rubber stamp: The 2006-07 Sweet 16 appearance, the 2007-08 NCAA second-round appearance, Kruger's 2007-08 Mountain West Conference coach of the year award, his 2007-08 U.S. Basketball Writers Association District VIII coach of the year award, and his team's performance in the classroom. This past spring seven Rebels posted grade-point averages of 3.0 or higher.

It should have added a sixth bullet: Kruger has built a program worth marketing, even if nobody else around UNLV seems to know how to do it.

So here's my prediction: One day Kruger's gonna find himself a big man and the Rebels are gonna play in the Final Four and the Thomas & Mack Center's going to sell out for every game. And then most of that additional ticket money that could offset the money the football program loses — money that could help the athletic department wean itself from Carson City handouts — is gonna wind up in the pocket of the basketball coach.

All because UNLV couldn't promote a winning program, forcing the basketball coach to do it himself.

Oh yeah. And then Mark Cuban or Google is gonna buy CoachKruger.com for a bazillion dollars.