Coach Rick Majerus dies at 64

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At Rick Majerus' final stop, the lone concession to the coach's health woes were the footstools stationed at each corner of the practice court.

Close by anytime he needed a breather. Close enough, too, to jump up for some hands-on assistance with the proper stance or to lead a quick walkthrough.

The jovial, basketball-obsessed coach who led Utah to the 1998 NCAA final and had only one losing season in 25 years with four schools, died Saturday. He was 64.

Utah industrialist Jon Huntsman, the coach's longtime friend, confirmed in a statement released through The Salt Lake Tribune that Majerus died of heart failure in a Los Angeles hospital. The coach had been hospitalized there for several months.

Players remembered Majerus, who got his start as an assistant under Al McGuire at Marquette, as a coach who was exacting and perhaps a bit unorthodox at times, but always fair. Majerus was known for assembling rosters with an international flair, and his final team at Saint Louis had players from Australia and New Zealand.

"It was a unique experience, I'll tell you that, and I loved every minute of it," said Saint Louis guard Kyle Cassity, who was mostly a backup on last season's 26-win team after starting for Majerus earlier in his college career. "A lot of people questioned the way he did things, but I loved it. He'd be hard as hell on you, but he really cared."

At the postgame news conference following Saint Louis' four-point loss to top seed Michigan State in the NCAA West Regional, Majerus and his players wept.

"Coach has done so much," Brian Conklin said back then. "Being his first recruiting class, he told me that we were going to help him build something special here. He's a great coach. I couldn't imagine playing for a better coach, a better person. He doesn't just teach you about basketball, it's about life."

Saint Louis athletic director Chris May said in a statement that what he would remember most about Majerus "was his enduring passion to see his players excel both on and off the court."

"He truly embraced the term 'student-athlete,' and I think that will be his lasting legacy," May added.
The school announced Nov. 19 that Majerus wouldn't return to Saint Louis because of the heart condition. He ended the school's 12-year NCAA tournament drought last season, and bounced back from his only losing season, with a team that won its opening game and took top regional seed Michigan State to the wire. The Billikens were ranked for the first time since 1994-95.

Majerus was undergoing evaluation and treatment in California for the ongoing heart trouble and the school announced he was on leave in late August.

"That's a tough one for me," Boston coach Doc Rivers, a former Marquette star, said after the Celtics' loss in Milwaukee. "He's the one that gave me my nickname. I knew before (the game) that he wasn't going to make it through the night. I don't want to talk much about it."

San Diego State coach Steve Fisher first met Majerus at a camp when Majerus was a graduate assistant at Marquette and Fisher was coaching at the high school level in Chicago.

"Rick would hold court at night with a case of beer in the basement," Fisher said. "Phenomenal coach, a better person, cared about family, cared about people. He will be missed by everyone."

Loyola of Chicago coach Porter Moser, an assistant under Majerus at Saint Louis from 2007-10, tweeted, "RIP to my friend and mentor Coach Majerus. I learned so much about the game and life. We lost One of the best! My heart is heavy tonight."

Missouri coach Frank Haith said it was a "sad day for all of college basketball."

"Coach Majerus was a tremendous coach and one of the all-time great personalities in our profession," Haith said. "Our hearts and prayers go out to Rick's family and friends and all the wonderful student-athletes and staff at Saint Louis University."

Majerus had a history of heart and weight problems dating to 1989 that persisted despite a daily constitutional of a mile swim. He had a stent inserted in August 2011 in Salt Lake City and missed some games in the 2011-12 season after gashing his leg in a collision with players.

He backed out of a commitment to coach Southern California due to heart problems.

Majerus was 95-69 in five seasons at Saint Louis and had a 25-year record of 517-216, with 15 20-win seasons and two 30-win seasons. He had his most success at Utah, going 323-95 from 1989-2004. He was at Marquette from 1983-86, and Ball State from 1987-89.

Ball State was 29-3 in 1988-89 under Majerus, including the school's first NCAA tournament victory. At Utah, Majerus produced 10 conference championships in 13 seasons.

"Rick left a lasting legacy at the University of Utah, not only for his incredible success and the national prominence he brought to our basketball program, but also for the tremendous impact he made on the young men who were fortunate enough to play on his teams," Utah athletic director Dr. Chris Hill said in a statement.
"His standard of excellence extended beyond the basketball court and into the academic and personal success of his players. He will be deeply missed and we grieve for his family and all of his friends."

Majerus took 12 teams to the NCAA tournament, winning at least one game in all but one of those appearances, with the 1998 Utah team losing to Kentucky in the NCAA championship game. He led four teams to the NIT and took Saint Louis teams to the CBI tournament final in 2009-10.

"It's a sad day for college basketball," UNLV coach Dave Rice said. "Certainly one of the great college basketball coaches. He took talent where they were most effective. When you went up against Coach Majerus and you won you knew you did something special."

Gonzaga assistant coach Donny Daniels spent a decade as an assistant under Majerus.

"He was a caring man, a gracious man, giving of himself," Daniels said. "He did so many nice things for me. He taught me how to coach and how to be efficient."

Arizona coach Sean Miller coached against Majerus when he was at Xavier and Majerus was at Saint Louis.

"We've certainly lost a member of the coaching fraternity that all of us respect," Miller said. "It became very apparent when you prepared for his team and watched him coach against your team that there are very few coaches that are more prepared, more detail-oriented that knew the game comprehensively than Rick Majerus. You could also sense that basketball, the game, the love of the game was really part of his life."

Majerus was a mentor to Ben Howland during the UCLA coach's days at UC Santa Barbara and Northern Arizona.

"He was a great coach and a really, really good person" Howland said. "It's a sad day for basketball because he was a brilliant man."

Majerus was openly critical of Saint Louis' affiliation in the Atlantic 10, complaining that the travel demands made it too hard to succeed academically. Yet he coached two academic All-Americans at Saint Louis, Conklin and Kevin Lisch.

A-10 commissioner Bernadette V. McGlade had nothing but kind words for Majerus on Saturday.

"The entire Atlantic 10 family is grieving tonight over the loss of coach Majerus," McGlade said in a statement. "His undeniable knowledge and love of the game was known to all, and he was an excellent teacher committed to the student-athlete. This passion made his impact on A-10 basketball over the past five years immeasurable."
Majerus was born in Milwaukee and earned a spot on the freshman team at Marquette, his hometown college. He didn't make the varsity under McGuire, who instead hired him as an assistant coach in 1971.

Majerus' ties to Wisconsin included a one-year stint as assistant coach with the NBA's Bucks in 1987-88.

"He's done so much for basketball at Marquette and all through the state of Wisconsin," Bucks assistant coach Jim Boylan said. "For me personally, he's always been there. He's one of those guys who, if you don't see Rick for a while and when something was going wrong and you needed help, boom, he'd be there. He'd basically give you the shirt off his back, if that's what you needed."

Three of Majerus' players at Utah were first-round NBA draft picks. Keith Van Horn was No. 2 overall in 1997, Michael Doleac 12th in 1998 and Andre Miller eighth in 1999.

Saint Louis is 3-3 this season under interim coach Jim Crews, who joined the staff last season. The Billikens were picked to finish second in the Atlantic 10 but have struggled without point guard Kwamain Mitchell, sidelined probably until January with a broken foot.

"Nobody loved basketball and teaching kids more that Rick," Crews said. "His passion for the game and the coaching profession was unparalleled."

Majerus' father, Raymond, died of a heart attack at 63 in 1987. He was a former secretary-treasurer of the United Auto Workers. Majerus was devoted to his mother, Alyce, before her death in August 2011.

He was briefly married from 1987-89. He is survived by sisters Jodi and Tracy.

The portly coach was unabashed in his love of food, always quick with a restaurant recommendation for whatever town his teams were playing in.