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Why Nolan won't shut up

### Biographer finds story of racism in famed coach's El Paso childhood

By Ramón Rentería / El Paso Times  
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LAS CRUCES -- Rus Bradburd set out to write a book exploring why basketball coach Nolan Richardson never stops talking about racism.

"As I got to know his story, it turned into another book," he said. "It made sense to me."

Bradburd, a Las Cruces writer, explains Nolan Richardson, an outspoken and popular El Paso sports icon, in the recently published biography "Forty Minutes of Hell: The Extraordinary Life of Nolan Richardson."

"I try to explain Nolan to people who wonder why he won't shut up about racism," Bradburd said. "I see him as an important political and social figure."

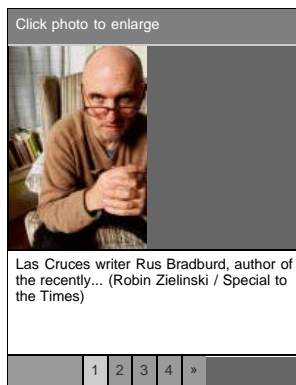
Richardson was raised in El Paso's Segundo Barrio, an impoverished Mexican-American neighborhood that embraced him and insulated him somewhat from the sting of racial inequality.

Richardson excelled as an athlete at El Paso's Bowie High School and went on to play at Texas Western College, now the University of Texas at El Paso. He was the first black star player for the late, legendary basketball coach Don Haskins.

Eventually, Richardson became the first black coach at a predominantly white school in the Old South to win the NCAA championship -- in 1994, at the University of Arkansas.

The book's title, "Forty Minutes of Hell," refers to Richardson's style of coaching his teams to play at a high-pressure, electrifying pace.

Bradburd, 50, a former basketball coach at UTEP and New Mexico State, talked recently about the book and the man he describes as "the most important African-American coach America has ever seen."



"Some people think it would be nice if Nolan was more subdued, more like (President) Obama and more diplomatic. But someone had to be the pioneer -- brash, confident and certain of himself and self-righteous," he said. "Nolan has a sense of righteousness that sort of pervades everything he does."

Bradburd suggests that African-American coaches in the United States were routinely cheated out of their rightful place in college athletics, usually because of overt or subtle racial injustices.

Richardson's Razorbacks made three appearances in the Final Four. He is often introduced as the only coach in history to win a Junior College National

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Championship, the NIT and the NCAA tournament.

Richardson's college coaching career came to an abrupt halt. He was fired after an infamous 2002

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press conference in which he accused the University of Arkansas of discriminating against him. He later coached internationally as Mexico's Olympic team basketball coach and in the Women's National Basketball Association.

Bradburd is convinced the book will make some readers uncomfortable.

"Nolan is constantly reminding us of the past," Bradburd said. "Everybody moves forward in their own time. But until we understand that black people were slaves in this country, we can't move forward."

Bradburd tried but could never get an interview with Frank Broyles, the director of athletics at the University of Arkansas who hired and eventually fired Richardson.

El Paso city Rep. Steve Ortega plans to introduce a resolution urging El Pasoans to celebrate Nolan Richardson.

"Beyond his feats on the basketball court as a player and coach, he has done a lot in the community behind the scenes to help people," Ortega said. "We want to recognize his humanity in addition to his athletic accomplishments."

Maceo C. Dailey, director of African-American Studies at UTEP, recently described Richardson as a composite of the border, an African-American fluent in Spanish and comfortable in social interactions with other communities.

"In studying his life and listening to him, we learn more about the complexities of America and some of the specificity of black life from a man who challenged stereotypes and succeeded at the highest level as a coach and motivator," Dailey said. "His life is a remarkable testament to resolve, tenacity, and grace on the way to fame."

Bradburd credits a lot of that tenacity to Richardson's grandmother, Rose "Ol' Mama" Richardson, the daughter of Louisiana slaves, who raised Richardson in El Paso and taught him that he was special.

So, what does Nolan Richardson say about this new book that seems to dissect his life so candidly?

"I thought, 'Rus has done a phenomenal job.' He did tremendous research," Richardson said in a recent phone interview from his home in Arkansas. "It became not so much a basketball book but a book that captured the trials and tribulations of how to survive when maybe all the odds are against you.

Richardson is convinced that the book reads more like a novel that is steeped in history.

In El Paso, Richardson couldn't go to a movie or the skating rink or the swimming pool with his friends because of the color of his skin. As a leading scorer at Texas Western, he was not allowed to travel with the team to a basketball tournament in segregated Shreveport, La.

"I was very fortunate to be in the Bowie area, because they treated me as if I was one of them," he said. "I spent a lot of time in Mexico, because Mexico was freedom. You could go anywhere you wanted. As soon as I crossed back over that bridge, I was a second-class citizen."

Richardson lost his daughter Yvonne to leukemia in 1987 in the middle of a basketball season, one of the most difficult losses he ever faced.

"But you don't quit. You just keep on plugging away and praying and hoping that good things will continue to happen to you," he said.

Bradburd recounts the now often-told story of the day Richardson was refused service at an Oasis Restaurant in El Paso when he stopped there with Bert Williams, who was a city alderman at the time. Williams eventually helped pass a city ordinance that banned discrimination in public places in El Paso.

"I was sort of stunned to learn that El Paso was a Jim Crow town until Bert Williams and Nolan accidentally changed it around," Bradburd said.

Bradburd, a Chicago native, took creative writing classes while still working as an assistant coach. He took up writing seriously after he quit coaching in 2000 and now teaches creative writing at NMSU.

Robert Boswell, a former Las Cruces novelist now teaching at the University of Houston, encouraged Bradburd to continue improving his writing.

"He's the kind of guy who brings an amazing work ethic to any endeavor he pursues," Boswell said. "Rus has been wise to stake out a specific bit of literary territory for himself, combining his remarkable skills as a writer with his profound knowledge of basketball. He has very quickly become an important American writer."

Although Bradburd also earlier wrote an acclaimed memoir, "Paddy on the Hardwood," he insists that polishing his work is still a difficult chore.

"Nobody spits out a book in one draft," he said.

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- President Clinton, in a book jacket blurb: "Nolan Richardson's extraordinary life and his success as the University of Arkansas's coach are an important chapter in the history of our country's struggle for racial equality, with all the excitement of the Final Four. I am grateful that I got to see a lot of it firsthand and to know such an able and remarkable man."
- Novelist Robert Boswell: "'Forty Minutes of Hell' is a sensational book, a very satisfying biography, a superb inside look at college basketball, and a beautifully written work of literature. Nolan Richardson was (and still is) a great basketball coach, and Bradburd successfully conveys the passion and intelligence that he brings to the game, but Richardson is also one of those rare

sports figures whose importance quite genuinely surpasses the realm of sports."

Signings and talks

- Las Cruces writer Rus Bradburd, author of "Forty Seconds of Hell: The Extraordinary Life of Nolan Richardson," and El Paso native Nolan Richardson, former University of Arkansas basketball coach, will sign copies of the recently published biography at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday in the Bowie High School lobby.
- Richardson will speak from 2 to 4 p.m. Wednesday in the Natural Gas Center at the University of Texas at El Paso as part of Black History Month activities on campus.
- Richardson and Bradburd will also sign books at 5 p.m. Wednesday in the Don Haskins Center lobby before the UTEP and Houston basketball game.
- Information: 747-8650.

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