



Photo by: Michael Germana Basketball Coach Richard Marquis

Ball in play

Part of Pasadena basketball coach Richard Marquis' legacy will be on the hardwood at the Beijing Olympics

By [Travis Hunter](#) 05/07/2008

Fifteen-year-old Richard Marquis was hanging out with his dad and his uncle at Main Street Gym in Los Angeles when he was tricked into stepping into the ring with an accomplished fighter.

"My uncle was goading me on, saying, 'Hey, that guy's talking trash about you, Coach,'" Marquis said, looking back on when he was growing up in the 1950s. "Oh — well, he didn't say 'Coach,' but 'Richard.'"

Marquis, a hardscrabble kid who would go on to win a Golden Gloves competition before leaving boxing for a lifetime in basketball, can be forgiven for occasionally forgetting that his first name has not always been "Coach."

Starting straight out of high school, Marquis has been a basketball coach for nearly five decades, working at his alma mater, Mark Keppel High School in Alhambra, then with varsity teams at UC Irvine and Cal State LA, and later coaching university teams in Korea and Japan. He's also coached national teams in the Philippines and Thailand, and once held a month-long clinic here he coached the entire Chinese professional basketball league, teaching the game to hundreds of players — and more than 70 coaches.

This summer, Marquis will host a basketball camp in central China, then take the players to watch some games at the Summer Olympics in Beijing.

His basketball expertise will be on display on the court at the Olympics, too, in the form of the basketball itself. As an executive for Molten, a Japanese rubber company that produces the basketballs used in international play, Marquis helped design the ball that will be on the court in Beijing. He got the job with Molten after passing a blind test in which he correctly identified the make and model of nine different, unlabeled basketballs strictly by feel.

He truly is a coaches' coach. No wonder his voice is permanently hoarse. And the man who founded the National Basketball Association's summer pro league isn't finished yet. He still runs his Play Smarter Basketball clinics for kids every week at locations around the San Gabriel Valley, imparting an unparalleled knowledge of the game to a new generation of players.

"If you have any question about basketball, he's your encyclopedia," said Tony Grbac, who was a kid when he first met Marquis at a gym in Monterey Park and went on to coach basketball at Mark Keppel. "He knows everything."

Marquis created from scratch a form of zone defense designed to neutralize an opponent's size advantage, Grbac said, as well as a "mushroom" offense that can now be seen in various forms around the NBA and college basketball.

Beyond that, Grbac said, Marquis is a teacher, a man he considered a second father. That sentiment was echoed by Monica Hang, a former player of Marquis' at Keppel who now coaches at Glendale College.

"He told me about the importance of education, and now I have a master's degree," Hang said. "He teaches about understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and your opponent's. He'll push you to your max and he's not going to settle for less. One of the best coaches I ever played for and one of the best people I ever met."

Marquis said his strength as a coach comes partly from his own willingness to learn.

"The first thing I say when I get to a new place is 'Let me watch you guys for a day and see what you're doing,'" Marquis said.

But Marquis always leaves his own distinctive mark. His success throughout Asia has made him a celebrity in the basketball world there, and Marquis was recently entrusted with the training of 7-foot-2 Chinese prospect Zhaoxu "Max" Zhang. Zhang lived for a year and a half with Marquis and his wife of nearly 50 years, Shirley, at their home in San Gabriel

before moving on to his just-finished redshirt freshman season at Cal Berkeley.

As a child growing up on the mean streets of Long Beach, Marquis was initially drawn to basketball because it provided ample opportunities to get into fights. After what he calls a "rugged" upbringing — his father left the family when Marquis was four months old — Marquis found himself "in a fight every day" before winding up in Juvenile Hall.

He reconnected with his father at 15 and took an interest in his father's chosen profession, boxing. He won a national Golden Gloves championship at 16 and was brandishing the medal proudly at Mark Keppel when Shirley snatched it away.

"She said, 'That's your last fight — I'm pregnant,'" Marquis said.

Luckily for the couple, basketball proved to be a solid fallback option. Marquis went on to earn a degree and work in electrical engineering, but the game has been his life. His "portfolio" does not fit the classic description; it's more like a scrapbook, packed with mementos like a photo of Marquis holding a basketball with Imelda Marcos, or a poster from the NBA-ABA All-Star series he held in Japan — the only meeting of the two leagues in history.

He doesn't bother maintaining a more traditional professional record because, in his business, wins and losses speak for themselves.

"I'm a basketball coach," he said. "Everything is on record."

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