In his 25th and final year as Pacific Men’s Basketball Head Coach, Bob Thomason goes out fighting, chalking up one last Big West Tournament championship and making an appearance in the Big Dance.

Bob Thomason

With two minutes to go in the last game of his more than 40 years of coaching basketball, Bob Thomason ’71, ’85 wasn’t going to go quietly into retirement. He was fighting for his team, for his men to work harder and play their best game.

He was coaching hard — and on a national stage — right up to the final buzzer.

It may seem surprising, since the team was pitted against No. 2 seed Miami in the first round of the NCAA tournament. Even Thomason admits the game was probably decided fairly early on. But that didn’t stop him from pushing the team and himself to the very end. That determination, commitment to his team, and passion for the game have carried him to an amazing career finish as the all-time wins leader in the Big West Conference. And though the job isn’t just about winning for Thomason, his philosophy has put Pacific on top more often than not.

By Sheri Grimes
"Coaching is about making the best with what you have, no shortcuts and no excuses," Thomason said.

What I’m teaching is what you need in life, in business, in how you deal with your wife and your kids,” he said. “Lots of the kids I coached, and even some that didn’t like the way I coach, call me up years later and say ‘Man, I can’t believe how much I’m still using.’”

Coaching and basketball are a family affair with Thomason. His dad was a high school coach who, Thomason said, has been one of the most influential figures in his life. Both Thomason’s sons, Jeff ’97 and Scott ’99, attended Pacific, and Scott played for the Tigers under his dad. Scott has carried the coaching legacy to the next generation and is a teacher and coach at Sierra High School in Manteca.

Though Thomason said he watched his dad coach games from the bench and began learning to shoot from the age of four, his dad encouraged him to look at other career options and steered him toward business.

“After taking economics and accounting, I knew I wasn’t going to be able to do that the rest of my life,” he said. “In basketball, you start fresh every year and build to a finished product. Then you get to do it all over again the next year. It never gets old; every year is different. It’s a challenge, but it’s fun.”

Back to His Home Court

After a standout basketball career at Pacific, Thomason became an assistant coach at Stagg High School in Stockton. He then moved on to head coach positions at Escalon and Turlock High Schools and Columbia College, before moving up to Division III at Stanislaus State. Along the way, he collected conference championships, set program records and developed winning teams.

Coming back to Pacific was a great move personally and professionally, returning to the school he loved and making the jump up to Division I.

And since day one at Pacific, he rose to the challenge. The year before Thomason’s arrival, the team had posted a 5–24 season with a 22-game losing streak and only one winning season in the previous five.

“My first game was his first game,” recalled Dell Demps ’92, ’98, former Tiger guard and current New Orleans Pelicans general manager, in a recent interview. “At the time, Pacific had the longest losing streak in the country. I just remember him promising me that we’ll look back on this and saying ‘We’ll take this to higher levels.’ I believed that he believed it.”

And he made good on the promise. The team broke the losing streak in his second game, finishing 7-21 that year. They went on to post 15 wins the following season and 14 each in the next two seasons.

Demps said he probably hadn’t logged more than three 3-pointers before coming to Pacific. He remembers Thomason coming out to watch his spring league games and telling him he would become a great shooter. Thomason and his dad both worked tirelessly with Demps on his shot, he recalled with appreciation.

And it worked. Demps remains Pacific’s second-leading scorer of all time, as he connected on 218 “3s” and went on to an NBA career.

“He’s one of the smartest people I’ve ever met,” said Demps. “I hope the students and alumni know how lucky they’ve been to have a coach like Coach Thomason,” Demps told The Record during a special recognition at Thomason’s last home game in March. “Seems like he’s always ahead of the curve.”
On the academic front, coaching for his alma mater made recruiting easier, he said. Having been a student at Pacific, he knew about the small classes and close relationships between students and faculty.

“When I was a student, if I missed a class, I’d see (Professor) Doris Meyers on campus and she’d say ‘You better get to class.’”

He knew that even students who weren’t very strong academically could thrive and do better with that kind of encouragement. That made it easy to recruit student-athletes to Pacific; they wouldn’t get lost in the crowd here.

“It’s easy to sell what you believe in,” Thomason said.

Helping his athletes succeed in the academic arena has been an area of coaching strength and pride for Thomason. His athletes who finished their eligibility at Pacific had a 96 percent graduation rate and they maintained some of the highest average GPAs in the Big West. He also boasted a stellar record with the NCAA, a clean one with no violations.

“I did it by the book and did it right,” he said.

Thomason felt this was the right time to make the change, with Pacific moving into the West Coast Conference this fall (a move he has promoted for some time). Making the retirement announcement at the beginning of the season allowed him to prepare himself early for the idea of retirement. He was free to be in the moment, just focusing on the season and the team without thinking of next year’s budget, recruiting, or other details that typically plague the mind of a head coach.

“It was fantastic,” he said.

As he embarks on the next journey in his life, he looks forward to working on his golf game and being able to take the first cruise with his wife, Jerri, to celebrate their anniversary, which had always fallen smack in the middle of the season. The long-time coach and Pacifican also reflected on his legacy on the Spanos Center court.

“I hope they’ll remember that I fought for them, individually and for the team.” And fight he did, right until the final buzzer.

“BOB THOMASON PACIFIC MENS BASKETBALL
PLAYER/COACH
PERIOD •••••
TEAMWORK
TRIFECTA

• Player 1968-71 (17.2 average points per game senior year and All-WCAC First Team selection)
• 25 years as Pacific head coach (1988-2013)
• Big West Conference All-Time Wins Leader: 436 (overall), 248 (conference)
• Finalist for CollegeInsider.com Jim Phelan National Coach of the Year award and USBWA District 9 Coach of the Year (2005)
• CollegeInsider.com Big West Conference Coach of the Year (2010)
• Gene Bartow Award (2013)

• Tradition of Pacific athletes having highest GPA in the Big West
• 96% graduation rate
• Four All-American players (Michael Olowokandi, Miah Davis, David Doubly, Christian Maraker)
• A number one overall NBA draft pick (Olowokandi)
• 59 All-Big West Conference awards
• Coach of the Decade – Bob Thomason
• Player of the Decade – Christian Maraker; three-time first-team all-league performer, Big West player of the year in ’06
• Team of the Decade – 2004-05 men’s basketball team, undefeated (18-0) in conference
Ron Verlin

To Build Upon Pacific Basketball Tradition

As Pacific enters a new era of competition in the West Coast Conference, Ron Verlin, the associate head coach for men’s basketball for the past 19 years, will be at the helm.

“His dedication to this University and ability to lead this program has become evident in the past 19 years. It is an exciting time for the basketball program heading into the WCC, and Ron is just the man to lead us there,” said Vice President for External Relations and Athletics Ted Leland when he announced Verlin’s appointment as head coach.

Verlin has been a part of Pacific basketball as the associate head coach under Bob Thomason for all five NCAA Tournament appearances and seven Big West Conference titles. He helped the Tigers to 354 total wins—10 seasons with 20 or more wins, including this past year.

“Ron is the best coach to take Pacific into the WCC,” said Thomason. “With his work ethic and experience at Pacific and support from the administration to improve men’s basketball, Ron will find ways to make Pacific basketball better.”

As associate head coach, Verlin served as recruiting coordinator, recruiting student-athletes from the United States, Europe and Australia. Among those recruits are 46 All-Big West Conference honorees, four league MVPs and four All-Americans. He has also helped the Tigers focus their academic efforts, helping to achieve a 96 percent graduation rate under Coach Thomason. Verlin also co-founded and established the Pacific Basketball Century Club, which has raised nearly $1 million for the basketball program since its inception.

“I feel very honored and privileged to be the 20th head basketball coach at Pacific,” said Verlin. “I am very proud of the history and tradition of Pacific basketball and feel very fortunate to have worked for and learned from Coach Thomason over the past 19 years. I look forward to returning to our roots in the WCC and continuing to build upon our Pacific basketball tradition.”

“Ron is the best coach to take Pacific into the WCC. With his work ethic and experience at Pacific and support from the administration to improve men’s basketball, Ron will find ways to make Pacific basketball better.”

— Former Head Coach Bob Thomason

Ron Verlin, pictured here celebrating the team’s 2013 Big West Championship, takes the reins as head coach of Pacific Men’s Basketball as the team returns to the WCC.