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# Hansen's Hundred, No. 22: Fred Snowden broke barriers while leading Wildcats to new heights

By [Greg Hansen](#) Aug 8, 2021 Updated Aug 18, 2021 Arizona Daily Star

## Snowden brought excitement, wins to McKale



Michigan assistant basketball coach Fred Snowden was interviewed by Indiana to be the Hoosiers' coach in 1971. The Hoosiers chose unknown Army coach Bob Knight instead.

A year earlier, Snowden interviewed with Western Michigan, but WMU hired Eldon Miller from small-time Wittenberg College.

And when Arizona athletic director Dave Strack was arranging for Snowden to fly to Tucson and interview for the UA basketball job — Strack's other candidate was Long Beach State's Jerry Tarkanian — Snowden's hometown school, Detroit Mercy, asked him to be its basketball coach.

Snowden declined; Detroit ultimately hired an obscure young coach named Dick Vitale.

So when Arizona announced it had hired Snowden, the 36-year-old son of a sharecropper from rural Alabama, it wasn't like the Wildcats were off the grid. One of the most successful high school basketball coaches in Detroit history, Snowden grew to prominence at the same time Strack was coaching Michigan to a pair of Final Fours in the mid-1960s.

The only pause in hiring Snowden at Arizona was that he would be the first Black head coach in Division I basketball. It was a big step for both Snowden and Arizona, one that Indiana and Western Michigan were reluctant to make. Snowden, who is No. 22 on our list of Tucson's Top 100 Sports Figures of the last 100 years, was a perfect fit. Outwardly, he had a charming demeanor. Inwardly, he burned with desire to succeed and become a model for future Black college basketball coaches.



Fred Snowden, the first Black basketball head coach in Division I, went 167-108 in his 10 years at Arizona.

### **MANUEL MIERA, TUCSON CITIZEN 1973**

'When my family moved from Alabama to Detroit in the 1940s, I integrated the Gill Elementary School,' he told me during a UA road trip to Kansas and Kansas State in the 1981-82 season. 'I found out my fears were greatly overrated. I've worked most of my life to prove that a Black man can be successful.'

'What I've accomplished at Arizona says I've been successful. It has worked. A Black man can do it.'

Snowden's first five seasons at Arizona were an overwhelming success. He often packed the new McKale Center with 14,000 fans, the long-founding Wildcats became a Top 25 program, and he recruited many of the nation's elite high school prospects: Eric Money, Coniel Norman, Bob Elliott, Herman Harris and Al Fleming.

Snowden was the most popular sports figure in Tucson. He played an up-tempo game, winning a wild 1976 Sweet 16 overtime game against Tarkanian's UNLV Rebels, 114-109, and ending ASU's 15-year domination of the UA-ASU basketball series.



UA head coach Fred Snowden surrounded by players during University of Arizona basketball vs. Arizona State at McKale Center in Tucson on Mar. 6, 1976. Arizona Daily Star file photo

But then it all diminished, as Snowden became less involved in recruiting — "he said he had a phobia about flying in airplanes," his ace recruiter Jerry Holmes told me. Once Holmes left to become an assistant coach at Kansas State, Snowden's program crumbled.

His last three UA teams finished 12-15, 13-14 and 9-18.

In early January 1982, a day after Strack announced that 'Fred asked to be relieved of his duties at the end of the season,' the Wildcats lost 59-53 to Washington State at McKale. Snowden was called for three technical fouls and ejected in the final minute.

In his press conference after the game, attended by only three reporters — far below the media crowds that followed UA basketball in big numbers in the 1970s — Snowden said he had attempted to leave Arizona a year earlier, applying for an administrative job at Detroit Mercy.

'In a year,' he said, after agreeing to be part of Strack's administrative staff, 'I will be equipped to be an athletic director.'

Snowden's coaching career wasn't much different that a meteor flashing across the sky and then burning out.

Strack offered perspective, saying 'people should not forget what Fred has meant to the UA's program.'

Four months later, Strack resigned.

A graduate of Wayne State University, Snowden was slight in stature, maybe 5 feet, 7 inches, but undeniably left a large legacy at Arizona. His UA teams won 67 of their first 70 games at McKale and pulled off the then-most celebrated home weekend in school history, sweeping No. 3 U CLA and rival USC in January 1979.

He just wasn't able to sustain that success.

After his final game at McKale, a 96-78 upset win over Oregon in March 1982, Snowden told me 'I'm leaving the new coach a Final Four front line.'

The new coach, Ben Lindsey of Grand Canyon University, went 4-24 with that front line.

Snowden went on to work in a corporate position for Baskin-Robbins. He died of a heart attack while on a business trip to Washington D.C. in 1994. He was 57.



The Wildcats played an up-tempo style under Coach Fred Snowden, who started UA's long history of dominance at McKale Center.

ARIZONA DAILY STAR 1976

Contact sports columnist Greg Hansen at 520-573-4362 or [ghansen@tucson.com](mailto:ghansen@tucson.com). On Twitter: [@ghansen711](https://twitter.com/ghansen711)