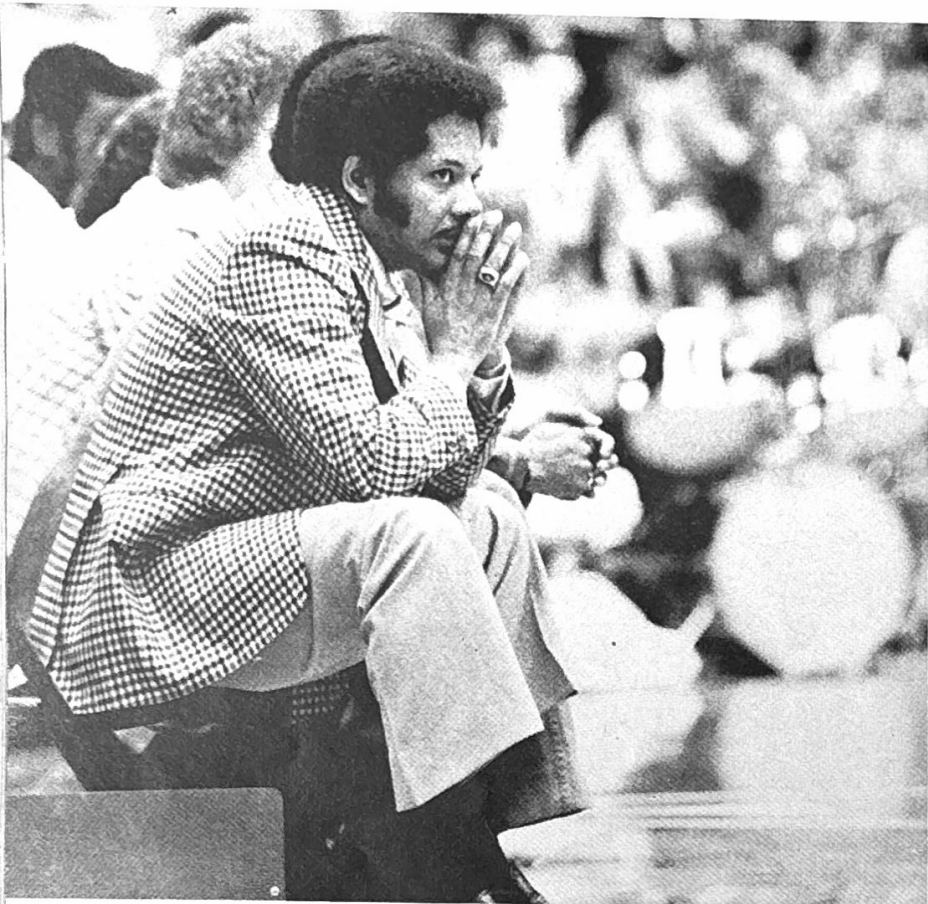


THE DESERT FOX



An intense man during game, Coach Fred Snowden is all eyes as his Arizona Wildcats battle SMU in key early season game. Arizona's McKale Center (below) was not completed when Snowden took post five years ago. Old gymnasium held only 3,500 spectators, while new basketball center seats 14,000 rabid fans and is usually sold out.

IN THE pale light of a chill winter's eve, the Desert Fox glided silently through the Arizona cacti, on the prowl for another kill.

He would not perform the act himself, however. He would leave that up to his Wildcats, a marauding band of University of Arizona basketball players that has been decimating the Southwest countryside for several years. Last year, the Wildcats wiped out the Western Athletic Conference with a 24-9 record. Before this particular night was over, the Wildcats would devour the SMU Mustangs of Dallas, 117-85.

All of this is delightful to the Fox. For it is he, Fred Snowden, the coach, who has brought the Arizona Wildcats to their winning forays. Beyond that, however, since becoming the first black coach of a major sport at a top university five years ago, Snowden has turned around the fortunes of athletics at the university, and set the populous of the Southwestern city of Tucson literally on its backside—filling up the entire 14,000-seat capacity of UA's new McKale Center even during such traditionally slack periods as Christmas week.

When you realize that the *old* basketball stadium held only 3,500 and the Wildcats hardly ever drew more than half of that, then you get some idea of what Fred Snowden has wrought.

For a more complete picture, consider this: In the 1971-72 season before Snowden arrived, the University of Arizona had a 6-20 season record, the worst of any team in the conference. In Snowden's first year he turned those figures almost totally around, providing a 16-10 winning season, second best in the conference. Over the next three years, Snowden's teams won a total of 65 games while dropping 23. At midseason this year, his team was ranked 10th in the country.

Moreover, last year Snowden's basketball operation turned a \$306,000 profit for the university's department of athletics—over a quarter of a million dollars more than football and all of the school's other athletic endeavors combined.

When David H. Strack, the university's new director of athletics,



Arizona basketball coach Fred Snowden makes sport a winning, paying proposition

BY LOUIE ROBINSON

arrived in 1972, the whole 10-sport program was losing. "It really needed revitalization," Strack says. So he immediately sent back to his old school, the University of Michigan, for its assistant basketball coach, Snowden.

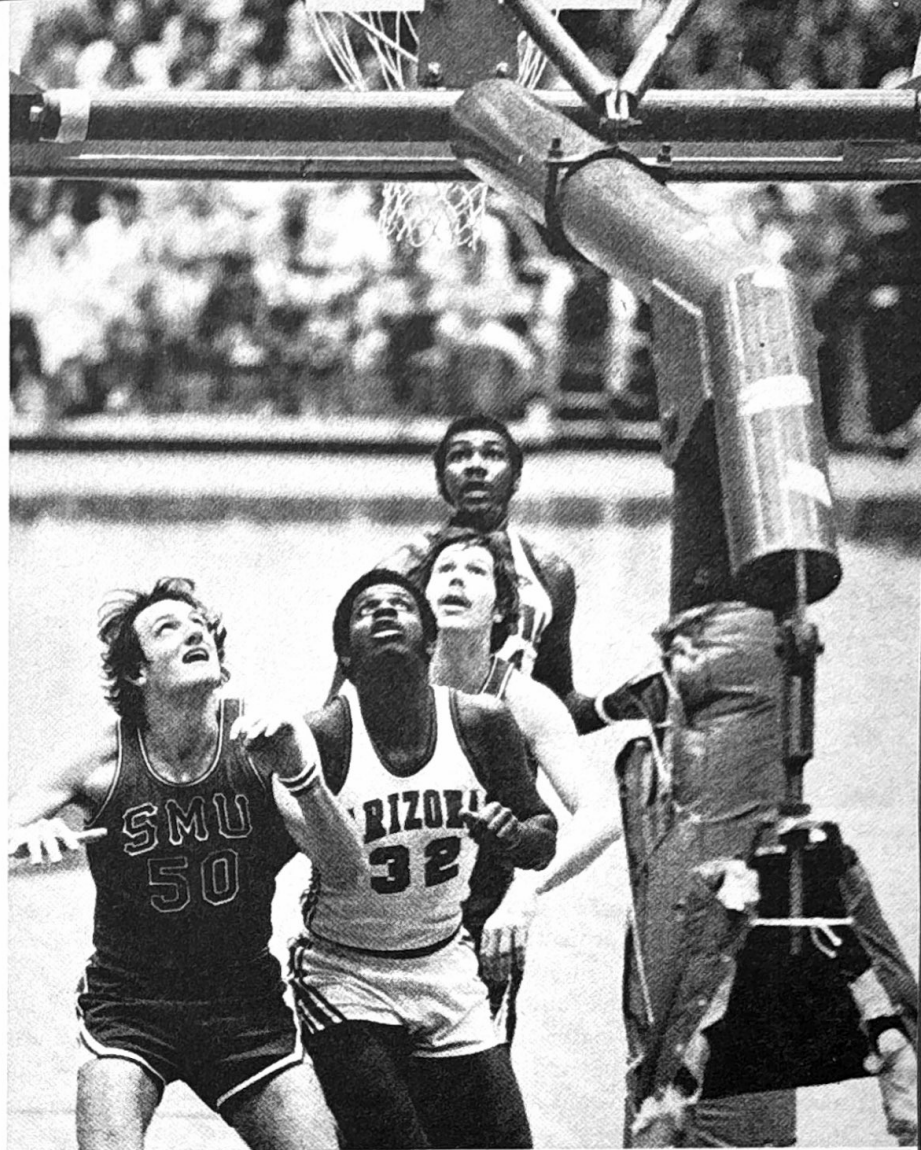
"Fred exceeded my own wishes," Strack admits. "He went into the old gym and won seven straight. We went from crowds of 1,000 to crowds of 5,000. The team had gone from nothing to something, and that's what the town and the university needed."

Indeed it was. The once dusty old country cousin of sophisticated Phoenix 18 miles to the north, with its hated Arizona State teams, Tucson has taken on new sheen and glamour. Historically a white man's town, it now boasts of its Mexican and Indian heritages. And it boasts, perhaps most of all, of its new black basketball coach.

Fred Snowden has co-chaired both Tucson's March of Dimes and Arizona's state Easter Seal campaigns, sits on the board of directors of American Savings and Loan Association along with some of the state's most prominent figures, is a former member of the board of the Tucson Urban League, is an associate systems consultant for Multi-Media Associates, has his own television show and, last but hardly least, was named Tucson's Man of the Year in 1973. His countenance appears on city billboards, and people call out to him across hotel lobbies and send him drinks in restaurants.

All this is hardly what might have been predicted for Frederick Snowden when he was born in a sharecropper's shack in Brewton, Ala., 41 years ago. Or later, when he was growing up in the mean streets of the Detroit ghetto where a black kid's best chance for escape was to sing his way out or play it out on the athletic field.

Fred and his two brothers were brought to Detroit's West Side by their mother (Their father stayed behind in Alabama). "It was a tough area," Snowden recalls, "but it was a stable area, one of single dwellings and two-family flats, well-kept because those were proud, hard-working



Snowden's players are as intense as he is during game. He expects them to put out 100 percent. McKale Center is a modern arena with good visibility from every seat in the house. The Wildcats are consistently rated in nation's top 20 in all polls.





Talking with Athletic Director David H. Strack, Snowden points to photograph of the two before new football stadium that is being built. Arizona is becoming a national football power also. Above, Snowden shakes hands with SMU Coach Sonny Allen as McKale Center events coordinator Clarence (Stub) Ashcraft looks on.

THE DESERT FOX *Continued*

black folk. They worked in the evenings in the yards after work, and the yards looked like manicured country clubs. When I look back on it now, I say that we all, in my generation, owe so much to that generation of working black families because they, without having an awful lot monetarily and materially, established an excellence of cleanliness and beauty that is beyond description. Even now, with the salary I'm making (\$32,500 a year) and with many of us having evolved into the mainstream, I am not so sure we are as sound in terms of fiscal management and decorum and that whole thing."

At age 17, Snowden was somewhat at loose ends, uncertain about job or college or how to approach the future. Then his uncle, Jack Harris, fell ill of an unsuspected heart condition. Harris had become a father-figure to young Fred, who went to see him in the hospital. Harris was in an oxygen tent, and the two talked less than half an hour. "The one thing I want you to do—not so much for me, I want you to do it for yourself—is make sure you get your education," Harris told him. The next day the uncle died.

"He had only a third grade education and worked morning, noon

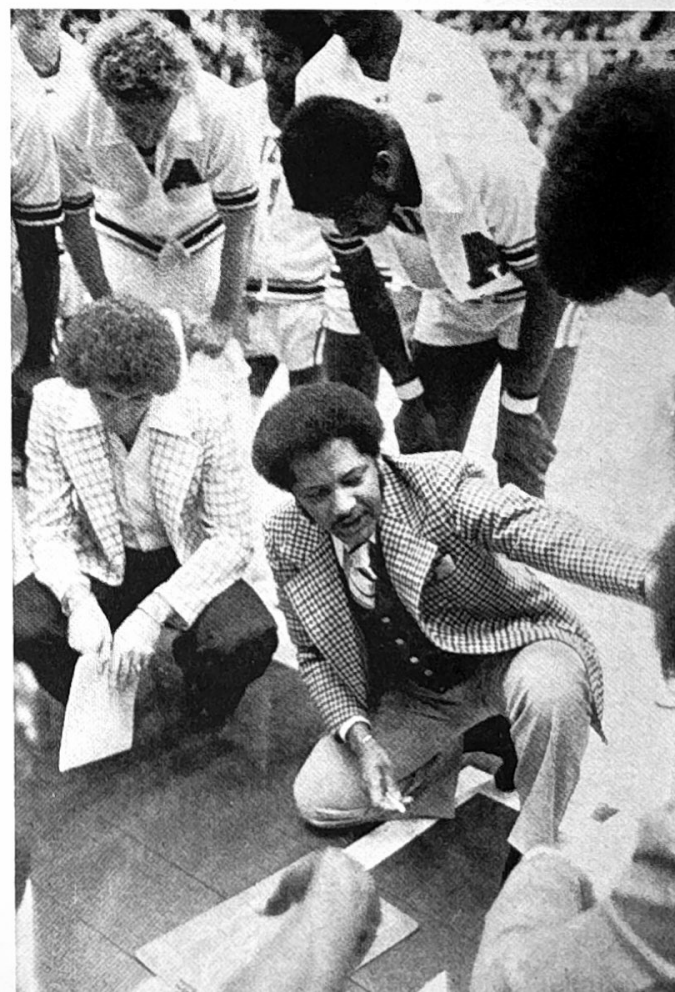
and night—hard work," Snowden recalls. "But his emphasis to me on education made me stop and realize what a great, great man I had had the opportunity to be around, and who loved me. That was my greatest loss at the time, but it made me make one commitment to myself and silently to him: I would get my education if I starved."

As a product of the old virtues, Snowden has brought many of them with him to temper and shape the character of his basketball players. He sees his primary obligation to a new recruit as getting the student to feel "comfortable academically." This may involve two nights of study table a week if the student is not maintaining a "B" average, research work and tutorial help. Once the student is on solid ground with his studies, Snowden can begin indoctrination of his theory of coaching. For this there is a 270-page playbook, which includes the things Snowden believes in, his philosophy and his rules of decorum to guide conduct. "We're selfish enough to think that young student-athletes, particularly in our program, should be among the finest future leaders in the world. So you have to set direction," he says.

Snowden accepts responsibility for how his team appears in public, for he knows that among the thousands of varied personalities in the



During heat of game, Snowden and his student manager Ernesto Valenzuela try a little body English in order to spur their team on. During a time out at right, Snowden outlines new strategy to confound the opposition. An inventive coach, he is quick to detect weakness in other teams. In first 18 games, Arizona lost only three and those by a total of four points. His team usually runs but can play defense.



After practice session confab, Snowden completes a soul shake with forward Herman (Herm the Germ) Harris. Snowden respects his players, expects them to respect not only him but themselves, as well.



In locker room conference, Snowden gives last-minute instructions to center-forward Bob Elliott. Snowden says he sometimes finds it hard to recruit black stars because the city of Tucson has small black population.



Gilbert Myles and Herm Harris listen intently to Snowden. The coach has said about his players, both black and white: "I try to be their friend at all times but I'll never be their buddy."



Before game, Snowden gathers his team for a last-minute lecture. After lecture they huddle in brief prayer session before taking to the court. He has disciplined players for "show-boating."



Helping carpenter line up basket, Snowden and his assistant coaches Ken Maxey (pointing) and John Sneed explain how much basket is off center. Starting team at Arizona is now all black.



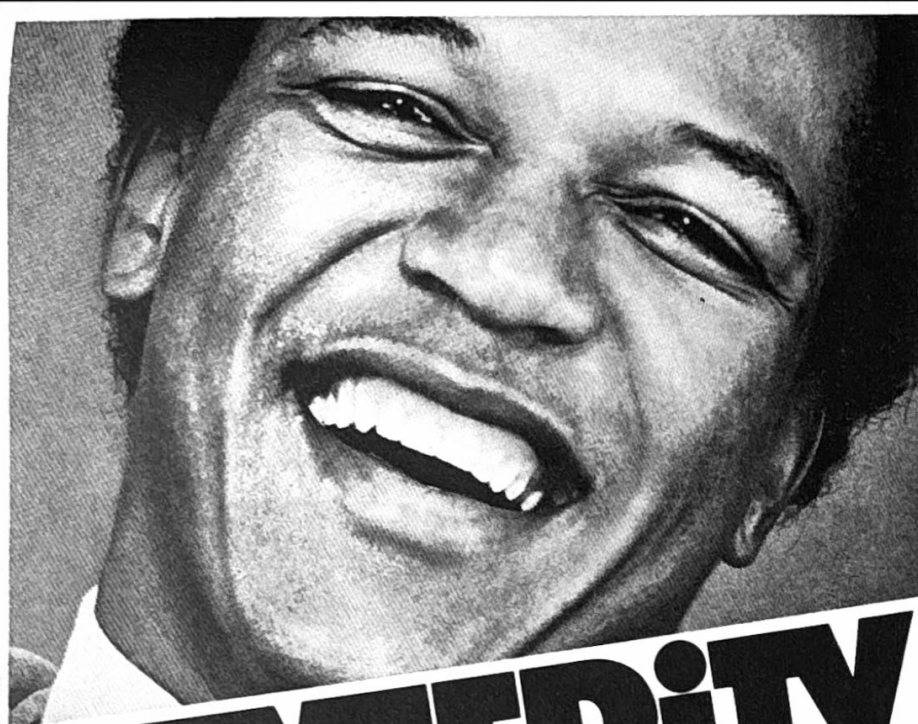
THE DESERT FOX *Continued*

stands are some who may one day be weighing a Wildcat alumnus for a job. The publicity-exposed moral fibre of that ex-player will then be more important than his basketball accomplishments, Snowden feels. So there are certain things the coach demands of his players: no smoking dope, no beards, no thuggish behavior on-court, no shirt-tails flapping in the breeze. As a guide to hair length, Snowden offers a black assistant and a white assistant coach, both with fashionable trims, as role models for players of either persuasion. Declares Snowden: "I try to be their friend at all times, but I'll never be their buddy. I think there has to be a distinction between those two. I give them my love, readily, as I do my own children. My respect they have to earn."

Snowden's players seem to get the message. Len Gordy, a 6-foot-5 guard-forward from Chester, Pa., who is thought to be one of the



Two of Arizona's staunchest supporters are Coach Snowden's wife Mae (above, left) and his daughter Stacey, 13. They won't sit together at a basketball game because they both get too emotional. Snowden's son, Charles, 22, now lives in Los Angeles.



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At board of directors meeting of the American Savings And Loan Association, Snowden peruses reports with (l. to r.) Jack Sarba, former state Democratic leader, John Haugh, a Republican Party stalwart, and Boyd Wilson, one of two biggest ranchers in Arizona. Snowden is also active in civic affairs.

THE DESERT FOX *Continued*

brightest players on the Arizona squad, sees his coach's greatest asset as "his knowledge of overall life things. He's the kind of teacher who is making us deal with the real world. He looks at his program as teaching us how to do that. Playing basketball is just a small part of the overall thing."

Whatever it is, Snowden gets the most out of his team, which does not always look all that overwhelming despite such talents as Gordy and Elliott, a slam-bang performing Herman (Herm the Germ) Harris, and a half-dozen other exciting players.

As much as anything else, however, Snowden gets the most out of Fred Snowden. "When I first came in," he explains, "I understand that I had to sell a program and get the interest back. So I talked positively. I'm a very private man, a very conservative man, but I had to create an aura about me that maybe would attract interest. And that's a difficult thing: the syndrome of the Fox, as they say (the nickname was placed upon him by a former schoolmate whom Snowden outfoxed on the baseball diamond). The public Fox is very unlike the private one. I'm a very quiet man. I do a lot of things with just my family and by myself and I enjoy that. But as a public image selling a basketball program, sometimes you have to get out of character, which I did my first year. Starting an all-freshman team and playing the likes of Southern Cal, we became an exciting run-and-gun action team, which was very unlike my previous 14 years of coaching experience. I was a very sound defensive high school coach. I had a very orthodox, fundamental-executing team, running when we had to. But here we had to sell the action and that's what the people wanted to see.

"We were fortunate enough to win more than we lost that first year, and now we're involved with great interest, fan adoration and the whole thing. That made the athletic director happy, the university president happy and the office of budget and management happy because now we're generating great revenues. But the onus is on me because now I've got to sustain it."

Taking the Arizona job was no easy decision for Fred Snowden in the first place, and he and his wife, Mae, talked about it long into the night. "I'm not going 2,000 miles to take a head coaching job, because I think I've earned the opportunity right here," Snowden said at one point.

His record was impressive, in fact. As a coach at Northwestern High School in Detroit between 1958 and 1962, his junior varsity basketball teams won 80 games without a single loss, and the var-

Coach Snowden tries to keep up with all of his correspondence with the help of his secretary Susie Mortimer (left). Arizona U. public relations man Frank Soltys finds it easy to place stories on colorful Snowden. He's rapidly becoming a legend.



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THE DESERT FOX *Continued*

sity ran up an 87-7 record. Snowden moved from there on to the University of Michigan to work under Strack and John Orr. Besides his Midwestern coaching accomplishments, Snowden had a blooming career as a sportscaster with local radio and TV shows.

But Mae Snowden thought her husband should seize the moment. "You owe it to yourself to see what you can do as a head coach," she told him.

So the Snowdens and their two children, Charles and Stacey (now 22 and 13 years old) came to Tucson, where Fred would take an all-white, losing team and turn it into a winning team with, eventually, an all-black starting five, and the stylish Mae would instruct white beauty salons in the mysteries of black hair.

"I hated Tucson when I first came," declares Mrs. Snowden, "it was like a foreign country. But the people are just super here." She now has become something of a pace-setter in the city, and may run for city council next term.

Obviously, the success that Fred Snowden enjoys in a city such as Tucson did not come easily. Recruitment of player personnel presents its problems: some of the more dazzling black high school talents are not readily attracted to a place where they will be such a small minority (only one-half of one per cent of Tucson is black) and where dating and other social amenities are limited.

But Snowden set out five years ago "to deliberately involve the community in my basketball program, to make it aware of me and my staff and my young people as individuals." He arranged for players to visit with families in their homes for meals and television-watching and just getting acquainted. The daily concerns and problems of his players were shared with a citizenry that took them to heart.

Meanwhile, Snowden was building his own image as the Fox. He spoke confidently, wore tasteful but hardly conservative clothes, tooled the boulevards in a silver Thunderbird and had his wife redecorate his office, which one associate describes as looking "like the Taj Mahal."

The Snowdens have endured pressures to find room at the top, but now they must cope with new burdens indigenous to that altitude. Mae Snowden has reflected upon this. "When you're at a high school," she said, "it doesn't matter if the team is winning or losing. Even at Michigan as an assistant coach, there was no pressure; if you won or lost, Johnny Orr took it. Here, Fred takes it." She thought for a moment, then added: "I suppose the pressure could be worse if you're losing, but Fred has never lost."

And what happens when the cheering stops, if winners become losers or fans grow complacent with success? The Desert Fox, that Snowden-made creation of whom the public and press have been so fond, may slip away into the night. But the reality that is Fred Snowden is likely to remain. He does not appear to be a man who easily compromises principle.

Already, he has shown a willingness to chastise reporters who make what he considers unfair criticism of his players. Moreover, while he has been canny in giving the public what it wants, he will not give it what he does not want it to have. Item: when one of his players showed an inclination towards a hot-dogging, Harlem Globetrotter-style of play, Snowden pulled him from the starting five despite some fan displeasure.

Winning or losing, Fred Snowden is likely to remain on top, for he has great determination and a solid sense of who and what he is. He knows, for instance, that America's ingrained racial attitudes will cause many to prefer to look to him more for showmanship and colorful caricature than for his abilities as a sound coach. "You're a black coach in a predominately white coaching fraternity, and don't forget it," UCLA's renowned John Wooden once advised him in warning that he would have detractors.

Nevertheless, Snowden is one of America's outstanding coaching talents, and plenty of teams will be happy to have him in the unlikely event that the welcome ever wears out in Tucson. Even if there weren't, he is still Fred Snowden, who declares candidly: "I rode into town on a golden stallion. I didn't come in the door raggedy. And I told them when I came in, 'I bring my dignity, I bring my manhood. There's nothing you can do to take that away from me, because when I ride out of here, I will take it with me.'"