

## THOSE WHO GUIDE THE GAME

NCAA Division II Women's Basketball Championship



Heidi VanDerveer is in her first season as head coach at UC San Diego.

# Impressive footsteps

*UC San Diego head coach Heidi VanDerveer has a clear path to follow*

By Ian Clark

**H**eidi VanDerveer has been following in the footsteps of her older sister Tara for years. Now, finishing her first year as head coach of the women's basketball team at the University of California San Diego, she continues to follow Tara while still blazing her own trail.

Heidi VanDerveer is the youngest of five children, raised in Chautauqua, N.Y., just south of Buffalo and not too far from Lake Erie. Tara is the oldest of the five VanDerveer kids, 10 years Heidi's elder. Tara VanDerveer has been the head coach of women's basketball at Stanford University for 27 years, where she has won two NCAA championships and was a 2011 inductee into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

"Tara is the single biggest influence in my life," said Heidi VanDerveer. "We talk almost every day. We watch film together, and any time I have a chance to go up there and spend time with her I do that."

"Both my parents were educators. I think it's a natural thing for people in my family to do. That's what coaching is. Coaching is teaching. It's a natural gene in our family."

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Tara VanDerveer in her 27th year at Stanford, and has won two national titles.

Growing up, the VanDerveer kids participated in anything and everything when it came to sports, from hockey to football to baseball to skiing. And of course, basketball was in there as well, and it wasn't long before Heidi was working alongside the first in a line of legendary coaches.

"(Women's Basketball Hall of Fame member) Cathy Rush was the head coach at Immaculata University (in Pennsylvania) and she ran basketball camps out of Valley Forge and the Poconos. Tara would go work as a counselor and I would go as a junior counselor," Heidi said. "We'd spend every summer working camps with Debbie Ryan (who went on to coach Virginia) and Muffet McGraw (long-time University of Notre Dame coach). Tara would drag me along. I think my dad made her."

Those camps were where Heidi VanDerveer first discovered her love for the teaching aspect of the sport.

"We were immersed in basketball," she said. "Camp is the foundation of basketball, and spending so much time around people who had a passion for it was really the best way to get into coaching."

Tara would go on to take her first head coaching gig at Idaho State from 1978-80 and then moved on

to the head position at Ohio State, where she coached until 1985. During those years at both institutions, Tara made sure Heidi was around to help out as often as possible even as Heidi was in the middle of her playing career at the College of Charleston.

"She was working and basically running my camps when she was in college, and I was head coach at Idaho and Ohio State and Stanford," Tara said. "She's been around basketball and studied it and has an incredible background."

It was during her college days working with Tara that Heidi realized she wanted to work in basketball and not law. That led her to work with yet another coaching luminary.

"I went to college and my parents hoped I would be a lawyer. I think they hoped Tara and I would both be lawyers, actually. Tara got into coaching and I would spend time, whether with her at Idaho or Ohio State, I would spend all the time with her there that I could," Heidi said. "I remember being a pre-law undergrad in college and realizing I didn't want to do that. I wanted to coach, and Tara told me I could go to one of four places. I could go to Indiana and watch (men's head coach) Bobby

Knight practice. I could go to Ohio State where she was and work with her, or go to Texas with coach Jody Conrad or go to Tennessee where Pat Summitt was. I wrote all of them a letter and it ended up that Pat had a spot as a graduate assistant, so I did that."

Summitt was, of course, the head coach of the women's basketball program at the University of Tennessee from 1974 to 2012, finishing her career with the most wins in NCAA history for either men's or women's basketball, with 1,098. Summitt guided the Lady Vols to eight NCAA championships before becoming head coach emeritus.

"Tara has been the most influential person in my life, but at such a young age working for Pat, I learned a lot about basketball and the qualities that you need for duration and longevity," Heidi said. "Being consistent in your personality — being fair to people. Pat has a tremendous work ethic. There are no shortcuts."

Up next for Heidi was an assistant coaching position at the University of South Carolina from 1988 to 1994. Heidi took her first head coaching position at Eastern Washington University from 1994-97. Her next stop was in the professional ranks as an assistant with the Sacramento Monarchs of the

WNBA. That position meant she was close to Tara once again.

“When I was with the WNBA, I was living at Stanford. For about 12 years all I did was watch Tara practice every day and work out of their office,” Heidi said. “That was the best, to watch them and talk basketball with her every day, sit in their meetings, watch film with them. I traveled with Stanford quite a bit. It gives you a different perspective on things.”

That was a special time for Tara as well.

“She lived down the street so as many as six nights out of seven we had dinner together, she came to practices, she helped with video stuff if I needed help with. We talked about games, players, strategy, watched men’s games, pro games. It was very basketball intensive,” Tara said. “You’ve heard of the 10,000 hours (philosophy, where you must put in 10,000 hours to be good at something), well we definitely put in the 10,000 hours together working at developing as coaches. It was never work. It was all fun. We loved looking at games and talking about what play a team ran or asking ‘did you see that at the end of the game?’”

Heidi would go on to bounce around in the WNBA, holding head coaching roles in Sacramento and Minnesota and assistant and scout positions with the Seattle Storm. There were brief stops at the University of San Francisco and San Diego State as well as stints with Team USA. She would then take the head coach job at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

When the UC San Diego job came open in the spring of 2012, Heidi VanDerveer recalled her previous stop in the city, and that experience was a strong draw for her.

“In San Diego I ran an international pre-Olympic tournament with Australia and the Czech Republic, and I always remember San Diego being a beautiful place and having a good feel,” Heidi said. “When the UC San Diego job opened I was intrigued by it because they had been very successful. It’s the best of Stanford and Oxy. UC San Diego has a great vibe, a positive environment, people doing great things. It’s a world-class academic institution. It made me feel like I was at Stanford in a way.”

VanDerveer had to take on a tough task for any head coach, that of following up a successful season. The Tritons were coming off the most successful season in program history, a school-record 30 wins and a trip to the Division II NCAA West Region Final under Charity Elliott, who is now the head coach at Loyola Marymount University.



In addition to guidance from her sister, Heidi VanDerveer served as an assistant coach under Tennessee coach Pat Summitt.

“You want to not just maintain. Programs are not just a one-hit wonder. You look at Connecticut or Stanford or Tennessee, those are teams that can sustain. You look at last year’s run for UC San Diego and it was very special,” VanDerveer said. “Our challenge coming in was to work hard to do the best that we can with the people that we have this year. We’re doing that. We started out a little rough, played a very challenging schedule, but I think we’re getting better every day. Again, it’s about sustainability. It’s about this year, it’s about the next two or three years, the next five years, the next 10 years.”

It was a slow start for VanDerveer with the Tritons as the team dropped its first three games to open the 2012-13 season. But from there, UC San Diego went on to win 13 of its next 16 games to get things headed in the right direction.

“I was able to go watch her team play. I’m really impressed with how hard their team plays, and I think she’s doing a great job. It’s a great opportunity for her. She loves coaching and she loves coaching where she is. She’s having a great year,” Tara VanDerveer said. “She’s had a chance to be around a lot of great coaches and learn from people. She’s developed her own style and she’s very knowledgeable about basketball. They run an intricate and really good offense at UC San Diego. She’s an excellent teacher. She has a vision for her team. It’s hard

when you take over a new team.”

The bond between the sisters remains as tight as ever.

“I’m the oldest and she’s the youngest, and we’re very close. We would be anyway, but when you throw in basketball too, we both live the same type of life with recruiting and coaching and experience the same highs and lows. That just makes us even closer,” Tara said. “I learn a lot from her, and we share a lot of philosophies and strategies. We work really well together. We just have a great relationship.”

The bond also means that Heidi can accept Tara’s advice with no worries.

“When you know somebody loves you, they can tell you things and you don’t get defensive because you know no matter what, they’re just trying to help you. Good or bad. You take it at face value because you know all they want is for you to be successful,” Heidi said. “They have no agenda except to help you become the best and have the best team you can. So everything Tara says, I listen to and apply to the best of my ability because I know that the experience she has and the insight and knowledge...just look at what she’s accomplished. I’d be an idiot not to listen.”

Heidi said that perhaps one of the most valuable lessons Tara taught her was also one of the simplest: just be yourself.

“One of the best things she ever told me, in the WNBA we were in the middle of the season and I was an assistant with Sacramento and taking over as head coach and she told me, ‘be your personality. You’ve got to coach your personality. You can’t be like Pat Summitt. You have to be yourself,’” Heidi said. “We’re similar, so I think the coaching style is the same, but you have to be your own unique self. The things in my personality that I try to use are to be positive, to be an excellent teacher, those are things I strive to be every day. To challenge people, to have a high standard, those are things that have evolved from my experiences, especially with Tara.”

As Tara VanDerveer continues her own legacy at Stanford and Heidi begins to shape UC San Diego in her own image, the VanDerveer family forges on in the sport they love.

“Basketball is so much a part of our family,” Tara said. “Heidi and I are the two coaches, but even my mother will go to games. We’re all coaching Heidi’s team. She’s the head coach and we’re all distant assistants. I just love my sister so much, and I’m so proud of her and excited for her to have this opportunity and know she’s going to be great at UC San Diego.”