

PHI SLAMA JAMA: TEXAS'S TALLEST FRATERNITY



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with
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The 1982-83 University of Houston Cougars. Front row, left to right, Reid Gettys, Eric Dickens, Alvin Franklin, David Rose, Derek Giles, and Renaldo Thomas. Back row, Benny Ander, Gary Orsak, Larry Micheaux, Dan Bunce, Akeem (later Hakeem) Olajuwon, David Bunce, Clyde Drexler, and Michael Young.

Photo courtesy of UH Athletics.

Beginning in 1981, the University of Houston (UH) basketball team with its ground-breaking style of play drew sold-out crowds and became must-see TV. The team's performance on January 4, 1983, sparked *Houston Post* writer Thomas Bonk to give the team a fitting name – Phi Slama Jama – based on its ability to dunk over its opponents. Bonk thought, "It's college, so if you had a college fraternity, what would a dunking fraternity be named?" After considering several possibilities, he landed on Phi Slama Jama, "and it worked."¹ The term became a sensation as people nationwide tuned in to watch the leading Houston Cougars, and it has remained as iconic as the team itself.

The UH basketball team rose in popularity for two reasons: the team's talent epitomized the caliber of many professional teams, and their style of play was fast. In general, basketball teams at the time played more deliberately than today and ran a half-court offense. By contrast, the Cougars tried to score in under ten seconds,

leading to many fastbreak points – especially dunks. This was significant because the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) banned dunking from 1967 to 1977, stating the dunk "was not a skillful shot."² The Cougars made it a hallmark of their success.

Team Building (1981-82)

In 1981, UH Athletics set its sights on building a contending NCAA Division I basketball program, not yet knowing the Cougars' future potential. Coach Guy Lewis, a former UH player (1946-48), was in his twenty-fifth year as head coach, and big-name players like Clyde Drexler, Rob Williams, Larry Micheaux, and Michael Young led the team to numerous victories. The team's more notable wins that season included a game against the sixth-ranked Iowa Hawkeyes on December 19, 1981, that the Cougars won comfortably, 62-52, elevating them to the eighteenth-ranked team in the Associated Press

*Olajuwon to Clyde,
back to Olajuwon for
the SLAM DUNK!!*

(AP) Top 25. On February 8, 1982, the Cougars played at The University of Texas at Austin where they defeated the twelfth-ranked Longhorns, 77-63. The Cougars triumphed five days later at home in Hofheinz Pavilion against the eighth-ranked Arkansas Razorbacks, revenge for Arkansas's domination over Houston earlier in the season.

After putting up a 20-6 record in the regular season, UH advanced to the Southwest Conference (SWC) tournament in Dallas versus the Texas A&M Aggies on March 3, 1982. Rob Williams led the team and went 9-13 with twenty-five points from the field, meaning all shots excluding free throws. One element that took their opponents by surprise was the play of Hakeem Olajuwon, who came off the bench early in the first half. He finished the game with ten rebounds, twelve points, five blocked shots, and two steals in just twenty-two minutes of play.³ After an 89-76 win, the Cougars advanced on a nine-game winning streak.

The consecutive UH tournament victories ended against Arkansas. After the teams split two games in the regular season, the Razorbacks implemented a defensive game plan that prevented the Cougars from making any layups in the first half. Houston kept the game close until the 7:55 mark in the final half, when Arkansas extended its lead, and the Cougars fell 84-69.⁴

Despite the loss, Houston qualified for the NCAA March Madness Tournament. As a sixth seed in the Midwest region, UH went on an improbable run as the team beat eleventh-seeded Alcorn State, third-seeded Tulsa, and second-seeded Missouri before making it to their first Elite Eight since 1969. Two days later, the Cougars defeated Boston College 99-92 in the Checkerdome, St. Louis, Missouri. Williams led the team with twenty-five points while shooting 9-17 from the field.⁵

This victory propelled the Cougars into the Final Four against the daunting, top-seeded North Carolina (UNC) Tar Heels team that included future basketball great, Michael



Jordan. UNC jumped off to a 14-0 lead and never looked back. Although Houston tried to claw its way back, the team only shot 36.8 percent from the field in the second

Larry Micheaux playing center for the Coogs, fends off West Texas opponents while going up for a shot.

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1982, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Michael Young drives up the court in a game against SWC rival Arkansas. Young was inducted into the UH Hall of Honor in 2004.

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1982, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



half. Lynden Rose led the team going 10-15 while Young and Olajuwon shot a combined 2-10. After the game Coach Lewis emphasized that the team had several returning players, and UH would be back the next year.⁶

Key Players in the Birth of Phi Slama Jama (1982-83)

In the 1982-83 season, when Bonk coined the moniker Phi Slama Jama, the Cougars put up a 31-3 record, went undefeated in SWC play, and advanced to the first national title game in program history. Coach Lewis's team was led by future NBA Hall of Famers, Olajuwon and Drexler and returning players, Young and Micheaux, who had played a significant role in the team's success.

Guy V. Lewis was born in Arp, Texas, in 1922 and grew up loving basketball. After serving in World War II, he enrolled at UH where he was the starting center until he graduated in 1948. Lewis returned in 1953 as an assistant basketball coach, and UH named him head coach three years later. He won a school record 592 games, reached the Final Four five times, and received AP Coach of the Year honors in 1968 and 1983.⁷



Clyde Drexler was born in Houston, Texas, on June 22, 1962. Drexler was not heavily recruited

Phi Slama Jama made its way onto the fan gear, with the tagline Texas' Tallest Fraternity.

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1983, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Coach Guy Lewis was known for carrying his signature red and white checked towel during games. Lewis was inducted into the Texas Sports Hall of Fame in 1994, National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame in 2007, and the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2013.

Photo courtesy of UH Athletics.



out of Sterling High School nor was he on the Cougars' radar until a Texas Tech coach mentioned Drexler to Lewis. In 1980, Drexler had already verbally committed to Texas Tech, but after Lewis personally visited Drexler's home and offered him a scholarship, Drexler signed with UH, where he would play with his friend Michael Young.⁸ Drexler was a perfect fit for the style of play Lewis demanded.

One of Phi Slama Jama's brightest stars, Hakeem Olajuwon, was born on January 21, 1963, in Nigeria, where he grew up in Lagos with his parents and three brothers. In his early years, Olajuwon was a soccer goalie, developing his agility and footwork. He started playing basketball in high school where he gained the notice of international coach, Christopher Pond, who identified talent for U.S. university athletic departments. During a title game in Angola, Olajuwon put on such a great performance that Pond urged him to play in the United States and secured a verbal commitment from Lewis so the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria could issue Olajuwon a visa. Olajuwon planned to try out for St. John's University, University of Louisville, and University of Houston.⁹

In January of 1981, Olajuwon landed in New York to visit St. John's and immediately disliked the cold winter weather. He approached an airport worker and asked which of his three schools had weather most like Nigeria. Olajuwon then boarded a plane to Houston, which felt right. "Moving from Nigeria to Houston was so natural," he recalled. "I went to boarding school in Nigeria so coming to Houston, was the same kind of campus lifestyle."¹⁰

Apex: The Houston Cougars (1982-83)

The Cougars started the 1982-83 season with five straight wins until they dropped back-to-back games to the Syracuse Orange and the number-one-ranked Virginia Cavaliers. The losses helped spark a comeback as the Cougars won twenty-six straight games and went undefeated in the regular season.

On January 2, 1983, the team dominated against University of the Pacific winning 112-58. Young scored a career high twenty-nine points and went 14-22 from the field. Olajuwon made all his shots from the field, scoring eighteen points, and Drexler went 5-11 from the field, tacking on thirteen total points.¹¹

Pacific's twenty-nine turnovers and the Cougars' ten slam dunks precipitated Thomas Bonk's article and his creative moniker, Phi Slama Jama, signifying the team's ability to dunk. UH went on to claim the SWC tournament championship.

The Cougars earned a number one seed in the NCAA March Madness bracket and were ranked first in the nation after going 27-2 overall and winning the SWC. The Cougars beat Maryland, Memphis State, Villanova, and the number-two-ranked Louisville Cardinals. The game against Louisville on April 2, 1983, showcased what dunking meant for the future of basketball, with Texas's tallest fraternity, Phi Slama Jama, going up against Louisville's Doctors of Dunk. Drexler and Olajuwon led the team with twenty-one points each, and the game ended with a 94-81 Cougar victory, thrusting the Cougars into their first national title game.¹²

Although heavily favored to win the NCAA tournament, UH fell to the North Carolina State University Wolfpack (NCSU) 52-54. The loss was heartbreaking for the UH players and fans. Basketball spectators nationwide, however, called it one of the best college basketball games ever played.¹³

The End of a Dynasty (1983-84)

Clyde Drexler declared for the NBA draft following the Cougars' national title loss, but eight UH players committed to staying in the program, including Olajuwon, Young, Alvin Franklin, and Reid Gettys.

The Cougars started the 1983-84 season with a rematch of the previous year's NCAA Final and lost to unranked NCSU 64-76. Seasoned pros in following losses with wins, the

Cougars won twenty-six of the next twenty-nine games, ending the season 32-5 overall and ranked fifth in the nation. Once again, Arkansas proved the



Clyde "The Glide" Drexler exemplified Phi Slama Jama basketball. Here he demonstrates the abilities Lewis sought in his players.

Photo courtesy of UH Athletics.

Cougars' toughest SWC tournament competition. In the last game of the regular season on March 4, 1984, the twelfth-ranked Razorbacks defeated the Cougars 68-73, but the Cougars returned the favor a week later, defeating Arkansas 57-56 in a nail-biter to claim their second straight SWC title.

Houston earned a second seed position in the Midwest Region bracket of the March Madness tournament, playing Louisiana Tech, Memphis State, Wake Forest, and Virginia on their way to their second consecutive title game. Olajuwon led the team in rebounds all four games and scored the most points in three of them. Young led the team with seventeen points in the semi-final game versus Virginia.

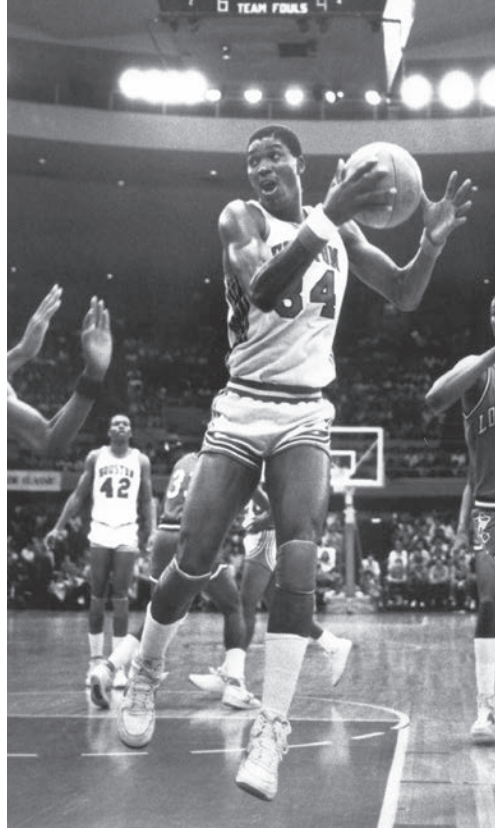
Once again, Phi Slama Jama made a deep March Madness run, meeting the Georgetown Hoyas, led by future NBA Hall of Famer Patrick Ewing, in the finals. Franklin led UH in points with twenty-one, and Olajuwon had nine rebounds, but Houston fell short of the championship, losing 75-84. Fordham University's coach at the time, Tom Penders, who later coached the Cougars (2004-2010), recalled, "I remember feeling really bad for Coach Lewis. He had been to the Final Four. It was his third trip there. I was rooting for the Cougars."¹⁴ This marked the end of an era for Houston Cougar basketball as Olajuwon declared for the NBA draft in the summer of 1984.

The Legacy

Phi Slama Jama undoubtedly left its mark on Division I college basketball though the team fell just short of checking off the final thing on its to-do list: winning a championship. Nevertheless, from 1981 to 1984, the Cougars had advanced to two straight national championships and three consecutive semifinals, gone 88-16 overall, and earned an AP Coach of the Year award.¹⁵

After thirty years as head coach of the Houston Cougars, Guy Lewis retired in 1986. He was inducted into the UH Hall of Honor as a player in 1971 and as a head coach in 1998. Coach Lewis's UH resume featured a 592-279 record, five NCAA Final Four appearances, fourteen March Madness tournaments, and six SWC titles.¹⁶

Many players from the Phi Slama Jama era went on to play professionally. The Denver Nuggets drafted Rob Williams in 1982, the Chicago Bulls drafted Larry Micheaux in 1983, and the Boston Celtics took Michael Young in the first-round of the NBA draft in 1984.¹⁷ All three played in the NBA before joining European leagues.



Olajuwon remains virtually untouchable as he handles the ball with ease, luring Louisville opponents.

Photo courtesy of UH Athletics.

Drexler and Olajuwon also had bright futures ahead of them. The Portland Trailblazers drafted Drexler in 1983, and the Houston Rockets drafted Olajuwon first overall the following year. Olajuwon led the team to its first NBA championship in a seven-game series against the New York Knicks in the 1993-94 season and was named MVP. The Trailblazers traded Drexler to the Rockets in 1994, reuniting the college teammates. The two proved they were still a force to be reckoned with as the Rockets swept the Orlando Magic in the 1994-95 NBA Finals. The victory meant Olajuwon and Drexler had finally brought Houston a championship as teammates.¹⁸

The accolades soon followed. Drexler was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2004. Olajuwon, the first player to record 2,000 blocks and 2,000 steals in an NBA career, was inducted in 2008. Both had their numbers retired at UH and with the Houston Rockets, and both are listed among the fifty all-time greatest players in the sport.

During the next decades, Cougar basketball did not generate the level of excitement that inspired Bonk's Phi Slama Jama moniker until Kelvin Sampson joined the team as head coach in 2014. Between 2017 and 2023, the Cougars won at least twenty games in six consecutive seasons. Coach Sampson led the team to Sweet Sixteen, Elite Eight, and Final Four appearances in the NCAA tournament from 2018-23. They won two American Athletic Conference (AAC) tournament championships and four season championships, while Sampson was named ACC Coach of the Year four times. In 2023, UH had two players, Jarace Walker and Marcus Sasser, selected in the first round of the NBA draft, a milestone the Cougars had not achieved since 1984 with Olajuwon and Young.

The team's recent successes have resurrected the moniker Phi Slama Jama in spirit and on fan merchandise. Fans watch the new generation of players win games surrounded by banners showing the retired numbers of Drexler, Olajuwon, and Young. As Houston fans recall the 1981-84 squads, they cheer the current Cougar team looking to make its mark on history, now that UH has entered its first season in the Big 12 with promising talent, a seasoned coaching staff, and the city behind them. **HH**

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