

# There's Bad Blood When the Warriors Play the Mavericks

**Coach Nelson, Mark Cuban  
Feuding Over \$6.6 Million;  
The Playoffs Get Personal**  
By PETER WALDMAN  
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When basketball coach Don Nelson of the Golden State Warriors team threw a party two weeks ago for some friends associated with his former club, the Dallas Mavericks, he greeted an old protégé with a hug and a compliment.

"You're doing a much better job than I did at keeping him away from you," Mr. Nelson told Mavericks Coach Avery Johnson, according to guests at Mr. Nelson's Oakland, Calif., home. Mr. Johnson smiled.

The "him" Mr. Nelson was referring to is Mark Cuban, the mercurial owner of the top-seeded Mavericks team. It faces possible elimination tonight in the first round of the National Basketball Association playoffs, by a Warriors squad seeded eighth out of eight Western Conference playoff teams. A first-round Warrior triumph over a Mavericks team that won 67 of 82 games during the regular season would be a huge upset.

For the 66-year-old Mr. Nelson, it would also mean victory over Mr. Cuban, 48, in one of the nastiest personal feuds in professional sports. Mr. Nelson says Mr. Cuban still owes him \$6.6 million in deferred compensation from his eight years as Mavericks coach. Mr. Cuban refuses to pay, because, he says, the NBA's second-winningest coach of all time walked out on him.

"It's like 'Desperate Housewives' in the NBA," says Wayne Winston, an Indiana University math professor who, as a private consultant, does statistical modeling for Mr. Cuban to predict which players, and referees, offer the best chance of success for his Dallas team.

Hired as Mavericks coach in 1997 by the team's previous owner, Ross Perot Jr., Mr. Nelson was mocked by Sports Illustrated as a "mad scientist" for trading away the team's top draft choices for a couple of unheralded prospects named Dirk Nowitzki and Steve Nash. Under Mr. Cuban, the dot-com billionaire who bought the team in 2000, Messrs. Nowitzki and Nash became the core of one of the most dramatic turnarounds in NBA history.

The Mavericks, playing an exhilarating, up-tempo game similar to the Warriors' playing style today, became perennial 50-game winners under Mr. Nelson. Though the veteran coach occasionally chafed at Mr. Cuban's kibitzing in the locker room, and the owner's infatuation with player statistics, the two generally got along in the early years, say people who worked with them.

Mr. Nelson hired one of his oldest and closest friends, Del Harris, as his top assistant coach. Mr. Nelson's son Donnie was hired to handle player moves in the Mavericks' front office. Both men still work for the Mavericks.

But just as the Nelson-Cuban revival was peaking -- in the NBA's 2003 Western Conference finals -- it started to fall apart. With the Mavericks facing elimination by the San Antonio Spurs, the coach and owner exploded at each other over Mr. Nelson's refusal to fulfill his boss's wish to play an injured Mr. Nowitzki, according to Mavericks officials close to the team's owner.

Mr. Nowitzki had suffered sprained ligaments in his left knee in the third game of the best-of-seven series, but, with the Mavericks trailing three games to one, was cleared by team doctors to play again. Mr. Cuban confronted Mr. Nelson in the coach's office and demanded the star forward return to the court, Mavericks officials say.

Mr. Nelson refused, insisting that playing the young German with the ligament injury would jeopardize his career. The coach also confided in friends that he had promised Mr. Nowitzki's parents, when the Mavericks signed the young man at age 19, that he would look after the seven-footer in Texas like a son.

"You're just looking for excuses to lose," fumed Mr. Cuban, according to two people who heard the blowup. Mr. Nelson threw the Mavs' owner out of his office, these people say.

The acrimony worsened after the team lost the series to San Antonio. Mr. Cuban, in negotiations to extend Mr. Nelson's contract in the summer of 2003, offered the coach what Mr. Nelson regarded as a pay cut, say people who were privy to the negotiations. As with today, their contract dispute centered on millions of dollars of compensation that Mr. Nelson had agreed to defer back in the Perot years -- money Mr. Cuban wanted to slash.

With Mr. Nelson openly threatening to quit coaching, they reached a last-minute compromise: Mr. Nelson got a three-year contract extension as the Mavericks' coach and general manager -- at \$5.1 million a year -- but no pay raise, despite the team's success.

"Nellie went ahead and signed that contract but the trust was broken," says a close friend who helped broker the deal.

After that, Mr. Nelson became increasingly cut out of the Mavericks' draft and trade decisions, to the point where Mr. Cuban refused to cover the cost of the Mavericks' general manager to scout predraft workouts by the college prospects, say associates of the coach. Mr. Nelson's alienation culminated in 2004 with the Mavericks' loss of Mr. Nash to the Phoenix Suns. Steve Nash was one of Mr. Nelson's favorite players and closest friends on the team. The coach regarded Mr. Cuban's refusal to keep the superstar guard as a personal betrayal that destroyed the Mavericks' championship prospects.

In March of 2005, Mr. Nelson, moping and depressed, relinquished his coaching job to Mr. Johnson, whom he had been grooming as his assistant. Mr. Cuban agreed to keep paying Mr. Nelson, now a Dallas hero, through the end of his contract in June of 2006.

"By then, neither one of those guys could stand to be in the same room," says Frank Zaccanelli, a Dallas real-estate developer who was a minority partner and president of the Mavericks in the 1990s.

Messrs. Nelson and Cuban declined to answer specific questions for this article. In a general response, Mr. Cuban wrote in an email yesterday that he has "no interest in talking about Don Nelson anymore than any other former employee." In an email on Sunday, he wrote, "If you take what Nellie says as fact, you will be wrong. To say he conjures up folk tales would be an understatement. The contract is the contract and the rest is up to the lawyers."

Mr. Nelson's lawyer, John O'Connor of San Francisco -- who worked with "Deep Throat" Mark Felt of Watergate fame in his unveiling in 2005 -- said Mr. Nelson "truly feels very proud that he and Mark built a great franchise in Dallas together." Mr. O'Connor said Mr. Nelson "personally likes" Mr. Cuban and hopes they can settle their financial dispute "amicably."

Mr. O'Connor says Mr. Nelson is in the process of making an arbitration claim against the Mavericks for the \$6.6 million in deferred salary the coach believes he is owed. Mr. Cuban has never publicly said why, legally, he believes he doesn't owe Mr. Nelson any back pay. But he recently expressed disgust with the way Mr. Nelson resigned as coach in 2005.

"I'm not a fan of someone who quits on his team, but will leave only if he gets paid," Mr. Cuban wrote in an email last week to reporters. The owner also wrote that Mr. Nelson influenced his decision in 2004 not to re-sign Mr. Nash, by indicating the point guard would get less playing time because of the risks of injury. And he wrote that Mr. Nelson sent him an email after the team lost Mr. Nash "confirming we did the right thing."

Mr. Zaccanelli, the former Mavericks executive who negotiated Mr. Nelson's original contract, says the deferred salary "is not an issue. He earned that money. He only stretched out the payment as a favor to us to help our cash flow." Mr. Nelson took a pay cut to sign with the Warriors last August, friends say. But if they beat Dallas, he'll earn close to what he did with the Mavericks after a hefty incentive bonus.

"Can you imagine, now, if Don Nelson comes back to Dallas and knocks Mark out of the playoffs?" says Mr. Zaccanelli. "It's unbelievable."

**Write to Peter Waldman at [peter.waldman@wsj.com](mailto:peter.waldman@wsj.com)**