

# A beautiful friendship, indeed

By Mike Burke  
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In many ways, what the Alhambra Catholic Invitational Tournament stands for and has become embodies a lot of the same characteristics and qualities that define what **Jim Yerkovich** stands for and is. After 30 years, it's nearly impossible to deny that it was both the fate of the ACIT and the fate of Jim Yerkovich to arrive to this point of the road together.

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

"There are a lot of mixed emotions," the coach of the Judge Memorial Bulldogs said Wednesday evening. "It's been a great ride, with the ACIT being a big part of it. It's been icing on the cake, as a matter of fact."

Yerkovich, who has more wins to his credit than any coach other than Jerry Sloan in the history of Utah basketball, 634, has arrived at the two-games-to-go marker on the road of one of the most honorable and distinguished coaching careers in scholastic, and basketball history. Yet when you think of Yerkovich's Judge Memorial teams — all 44 of them — sure, you think about how good they are, but all of the victories he has led his team to are never the first thing to enter your mind.

What enters your mind is the man's code and integrity, the biggest reason Judge Memorial has been here 13 times.

"(ACIT founder, the late **Joe Divico**) left it to Jim," said **Joe Carter**, chairman of the ACIT, who served as Divico's right-hand man for many years. "Joe would say, 'Jim, if you're good enough to compete here, call us. And really, it's always come down to that. Jim has always been honest. There was never a doubt in Joe's mind about that.'"

"I opt not to go to preseason or holiday tournaments," said Yerkovich, "because if we're good enough and if I'm going to ask to go someplace, it's going to be here."

## Judge's record at ACIT

As of 2010, Judge has an 18-21 record in this tournament. Judge has been one of 85 Catholic schools nationally to be invited. Only five other schools have played more.

**1980 (1-2, 4th place)** – Judge 58, Bishop Walsh (Md.) 54; DeMatha (Md.) 82, Judge 61; Calvert Hall (Md.) 79, Judge 77.

**1985 (2-1, 3<sup>rd</sup> place)** – Judge 60, Bishop Walsh 53; St. John's (D.C.) 65, Judge 51; Judge 57, St. John Neumann (Pa.) 56.

**1988 (2-1, consolation winner)** – Northeast Catholic (Pa.) 62, Judge 60; Judge 57, Strake Jesuit (Texas) 51; Judge 86, Bishop Walsh 77.

**1989 (2-1, 3<sup>rd</sup> place)** – Judge 85, Marian Christian (Texas) 70; Archbishop Carroll (D.C.) 87, Judge 85; Judge 101, Calvert Hall 98.

**1990 (2-1, 2<sup>nd</sup> place)** – Judge 79, Archbishop Carroll 72; Judge 64, Gonzaga (D.C.) 62; Roman Catholic (Pa.) 72, Judge 69.

**1993 (2-1, consolation winner)** – Roman Catholic 56, Judge 49; Judge 59, Bishop Walsh 46; Judge 53, Towson Catholic (Md.) 46.

**1996 (0-3)** – DeMatha 56, Judge 41; Archbishop John Carroll (Pa.) 79, Judge 35; Bishop Walsh 60, Judge 57.

**2000 (2-1, consolation winner)** – Roman Catholic 50, Judge 47; Judge 71, St. John's (D.C.) 52; Judge 50, Towson Catholic 50.

**2002 (1-2, third place consolation)** – Bishop O'Connell (Va.) 71, Judge 41, Archbishop Spalding (Md.) 52, Judge 49; Judge 82, Bishop Walsh 47.

**2003 (0-3)** – Judge 59, Mt. St. Joseph's (Md.) 53; Bishop O'Connell 71, Judge 54; Archbishop Spalding 61, Judge 54.

**2006 (1-2, third place consolation)** – DeMatha 77, Judge 45; St. John's (D.C.) 80, Judge 68; Judge 105, Bishop Walsh 40.

**2008 (1-2, third place consolation)** – Benedictine (Va.) 65, Judge 52; Mt. St. Joseph (Md.) 62, Judge 53; Judge 63, Bishop Walsh 54

**2010 (1-2)** – Mt. St. Joseph 59, Judge 41; Judge 49, Bishop Walsh 31; St. Frances Academy (Md.) 42, Judge 34

"I'll always remember our first one (1980) when Joe and Joe took a chance on us. I prayed for that second chance, and this is now our 13th."

In that first one, Judge Memorial won its first ACIT game, 58-54, over Bishop Walsh, coached by none other than **Joe Carter**.

"I look at Jim when he first came here in 1980," said Carter. "Jim always had great guards. Defensively, he was very strong and he ran an unbelievable delay game at the end of games when he was ahead."

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“I think he learned a lot from the coaches here like **Morgan (Wootten)** and **Speedy (Morris)**, which is why I think he loves it so much.”

Judge finished 1-2 in 1980 to place fourth. And then Yerkovich prayed for five years for that second chance, which came in 1985 and resulted in a third-place finish. So how big of a chance were Divico and Carter taking?

“You’re bringing in a team that you do not know much about,” said Carter, “and the team is from Salt Lake City, Utah to boot. In (Divico’s) way, he was always looking for new teams. Any time Joe could bring a team from somewhere else, he did.

“Now this Joe didn’t have much of a decision in who came and who didn’t. I was still coaching then, so I didn’t have a lot to do with inviting teams. But you look at the type of players they had, the kind of people they are, and the number of people they bring. And almost instantly, we knew we did the right thing.”

And would continue to do the right thing as Judge delivered with Yerkovich’s coaching, and with the play of such greats like **Jimmy Soto**, **Chris Jones**, **Rob Solvanson** and **Ben Melmeth**.

“This tournament is the best,” said Yerkovich, who is known for the “We” approach he incorporated into his



Jim Yerkovich talks with Bishop Walsh coach Jeff Rhodes at the 2010 ACIT Welcoming Dinner.

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- **Judge coach Jim Yerkovich**

program almost from the beginning. “Not only for the great teams like DeMatha and Gonzaga, but for very much more the people. This tournament shows what sports can be to a community of people and friends.

“It’s what people give.”

What the people here have given Yerkovich is a warm spot in his heart for Cumberland and for Wamba Caravan 89.

“I will always be honored,” Yerkovich said, “that when Joe Divico died and was eulogized by the ACIT in booklet form, the three coaches they asked for comments from were Morgan, Speedy and myself. I’m so proud of that fact. In fact, that might be my most cherished coaching honor.

“When we came here

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Will Whitt (right) and Zach Myaer surround a Bishop Walsh player during Judge's victory in the ACIT.

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the first time, I just wanted to talk to Morgan and see one of his (DeMatha) practices. Now he and I are great friends because of the ACIT. I've always said they should write about the ACIT in *Sports Illustrated*, and I've always sincerely believed that."

Yerkovich, an accomplished speaker, has spoken at the National Catholic Education Association's annual meetings several times emphasizing his "basketball is a classroom for values" formula.

In the 2010 ACIT program, there was a full-page message to Yerkovich from the general chairman Carter, which read in part, "Jim, you have always spoken about the 'we' approach, which has been your coaching trademark that you have instilled in your players for 44 years.

In 2003, Yerkovich published "We, a Model for Coaching and Christian Living" as a formal

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presentation of his coaching philosophies, and the book is used as a resource in more than 800 Catholic schools around the country.

However, it is 'we', the members of Wamba Caravan No. 89, who have been touched by your dignity, values and friendship."

"I think," said Carter, "that says it best about Jim Yerkovich."

As one might say at a Catholic basketball tournament, "Amen."

*Mike Burke is sports editor of the Cumberland (Md.) Times-News.*