

# SCOUTS MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 2007

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Embracing Leadership Kobe Bryant  
and His Young Teammates Learning Trust

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### **Transforming Perception**

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## Letter from the Editor



## It's Vegas, Baby!

Just about 18 months ago we came up with the idea for SWISH Magazine. It's hard to believe how much momentum we continue to gain as each issue passes.

To all of our friends: you flatter us with your interest and inspire us with your demands for more.

As we embarked on this issue, our second All-Star Issue, we wanted to make sure it had the same "inside and behind-the-scenes" feel our previous issues had, but we also wanted the book to feature some of the bigger names in the game.

We sat down and threw names and ideas on the table and the list became a "Who's Who" of NBA All-Stars, so when we ultimately decided to get Kobe, LeBron, Iverson, Tracy, and Dwight it seemed like maybe we'd bitten off more than we could chew. However, again our team answered the call and stepped up with another HUGE issue, truly our best body of work yet.

We hope you enjoy a look into the NBA's All-Stars. Our next issue is slated for May of 2007 and will be our Playoff issue, featuring the biggest names in the playoff race. As things stand right now, the Western Conference is a pretty easy race to handicap but it could be just about any team in the Eastern Conference. We've committed the cover to Dallas' Jason Terry, but it will surely feature the Phoenix Suns, the Denver Nuggets, the LA Lakers, the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Detroit Pistons – and we'll also be rooting for Minnesota, Utah, Chicago, Orlando and Miami. So while we get back to work bringing you some of these teams' best stories... sit back and enjoy the second annual All-Star issue of SWISH Magazine. Truly our best issue yet...

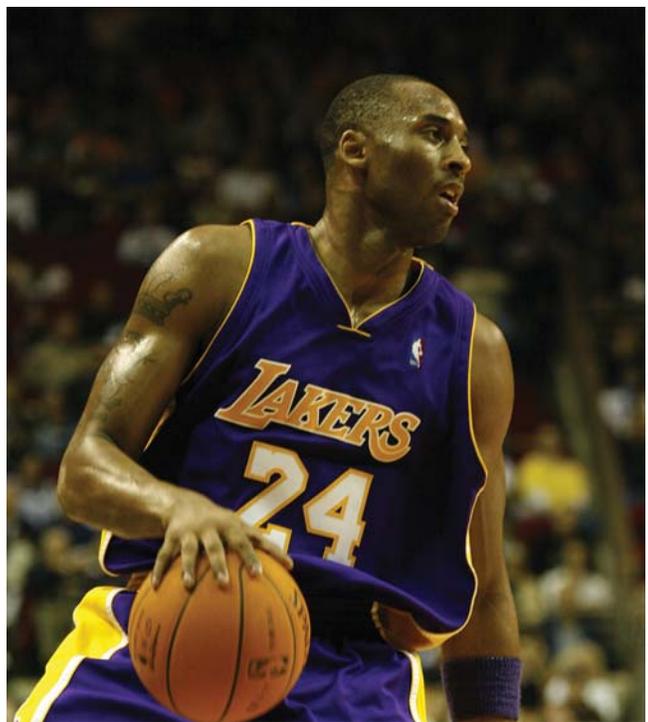
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### Boozer Ballin' Despite Skeptics

By Travis Heath

Bust. Overrated. Soft.

Carlos Boozer has heard all of these descriptors and then some during his tenure with the Utah Jazz. Still, his confidence in his ability to be a premiere NBA power forward never wavered.

Boozer has dealt with doubters his entire life, starting with his days at Douglas High School in Juneau, Alaska. Yes, you read that correctly: Juneau, Alaska.

"Just like anywhere, you work hard, stay in the gym and keep working on your game," Boozer explained in a very matter of fact tone. "I was fortunate to play AAU basketball, so I traveled around the country in high school playing different guys in different tournaments. Once you get recognized you move on from there. Then I went to Duke University and got a lot of love over there."

Boozer may have gotten a lot of love during his three years at Duke - where he still ranks as the school's all time field goal percentage leader - but the NBA didn't show the big man quite as much love. Despite helping Duke to a National Championship in 2001, Boozer was left sitting in the green room as player after player was picked ahead of him in the 2002 NBA Draft.

When his name was finally called by the Cleveland Cavaliers it was as the 35<sup>th</sup> overall pick.

Boozer still hasn't forgotten the feeling that churned in his stomach that June evening in 2002.

"It's fueled me a great deal," confided Boozer. "I thought I was a first round caliber player, but I went 35<sup>th</sup>. It ended up being a blessing in disguise so to speak. It definitely motivates you when

you think you should have gone higher in the draft and you see other players and what they're doing."

Mike Dunleavy Jr., Nene, Chris Wilcox, and Melvin Ely were just a few of the players selected ahead of Boozer.

"Every time I see those guys I want to have a good game against them to prove that I'm better than them," Boozer acknowledged with a friendly smile. "It's definitely motivating, and it still motivates me today."

Boozer left the Cleveland Cavaliers amidst controversy - the Cavs claimed

turned to the court for the Jazz he would never be the player he once was.

Boozer never doubted he would return to top form despite all the injuries and missed games.

"Oh, no. Never that. I knew it was just a matter of time. It was just a matter of *when* I was able to get back on the court."

Still, being out of the line-up for such an extended period of time was difficult.

"It was tough. The good thing about it was I had my family around me and my teammates always supported me. I just

focused on getting back healthy, and that's all you can really do at that time. There's going to be things said when a player gets hurt and is out for so long. All you've got to do as a player is be confident in yourself and your ability, and *when you're able to play*, just go do what you can do."

Boozer has been doing what he can do and then some so far this season, and his teammates and coaches have taken notice.

"I think it's his desire, he wanted to prove people wrong," Assistant Coach Tyrone Corbin said of Boozer's monster 2006-07 season. "People started questioning the fact that he was hurt the last couple of years and if he's going to be a guy who's chronically hurt because he got the big contract."

Boozer made it clear, however, he doesn't care what people think of him.

"No, I don't want to prove anything. I could care less what other people say about me. All I care about is how we do as a

team, how I perform individually, and trying to win games. We have a team of some guys that haven't been to the postseason yet. I'm one of those guys, and I'm anxious to get there. So that's what motivates me the most."

No matter how much success the big man from Alaska has, people will continue to doubt, but while they're busy doing that, Carlos Boozer will continue to ball.



he reneged on an oral agreement - to sign with the Utah Jazz in the summer of 2004. Upon his arrival in Salt Lake City the injury bug hit almost immediately, limiting him to just 51 games in his first season and 33 games in 2005-06. As a result, many of Boozer's doubters gradually began to resurface. They wondered aloud if Boozer was "faking" his injury, perhaps to force a trade to another city. Others were sure that even if he re-

### Just Try and Keep Pace With 'The Brazilian Blur'

By Tracy Graven

Phoenix Suns utility guard Leandro Mateus Barbosa is fast becoming a classic-type player, his streaking speed making basketball fans use all five senses and instant replay to keep pace with him in the transition game - which in Phoenix is about every other possession.

Odd for someone who grew up in a country where soccer is the national pastime.

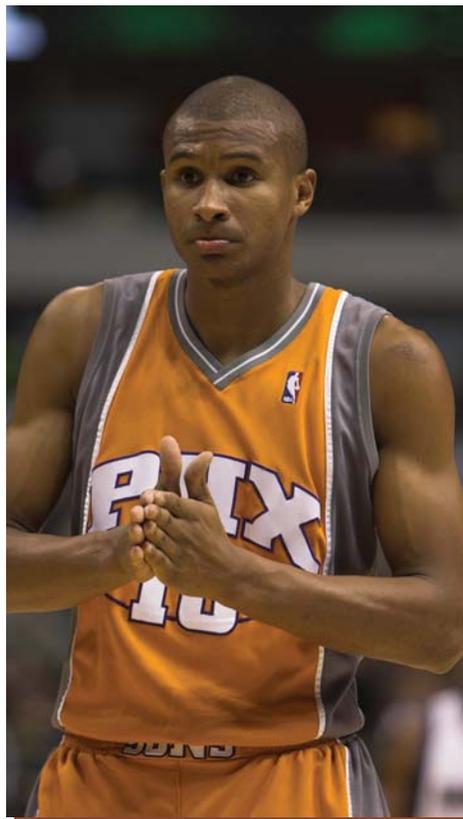
"My brother (Arturo, 21 years older) used to play basketball back in the day and I was with him all the time," explained the mild-mannered Barbosa. "I decided to play basketball because it was too hard to get on a (soccer) team in Brazil, with so many people wanting to play the same sport. I decided to play (basketball) and my brother was the deciding factor for me to change sports."

That love led him to the NBA, where Leandro was originally a draft pick of the San Antonio Spurs in 2003, but they traded his rights to Phoenix for a future protected first-round pick. The 2003 draft was significant because it brought names like LeBron James and Dwyane Wade; but it was also noted for having 21 international players.

Barbosa made the Brazilian Junior National Team at the age of 15, going on to be named Brazilian League Rookie of the Year after averaging 15.8 points, 6.4 assists and 1.7 steals for Bauria Tilibra in 2001-02. The next year it was 28.2 points, 7.0 assists and 4.0 rebounds.

Barbosa's endless highlight-reel-worthy playmaking makes him worthy of either The Sixth Man of the Year Award or Most Improved - it's possible both could happen this season.

They call him 'The Brazilian Blur,' and that's befitting to those who watch him play; those he plays against barely even get a chance to whiff his exhaust. Watching Tracy McGrady keep pace with him earlier this season was like listening to the 1974 comedy smash, *The Streak*, and imagining Ray Stevens try-



ing to catch him in the act.

People often comment on Barbosa after games — overheard already this season: "He's one of the fastest [players] I've ever seen!"

"When I was a kid I used to run a lot," reflected Barbosa. "I love to run, and with things I like to do best, I always try and do my best. I have always run the fastest that I can."

The rest can only try and keep up.

Instead of Pelé, Barbosa grew up idolizing players like Jordan, Magic, Bird and Isiah. Reflecting on Barbosa's overall game, each superstar's influence can be seen. Yet Barbosa has his own unique style, setting him apart from other reserve players in the league. His game is so expansive Phoenix head coach Mike D'Antoni has said nothing surprises him. Barbosa simply does it all ... and then some.

"He is playing well and he's getting bet-

ter," says D'Antoni. "He just keeps learning how to play, and he shoots the ball so well, he does not surprise anybody. He is just developing into a really good player."

"I'm beginning to have a lot of confidence and feel comfortable on the court every time I have an opportunity to be there," said Barbosa of his ever-evolving game. "(Assistant) Coach Dan D'Antoni has helped me out a lot and Mike D'Antoni gives me a lot of opportunities to be on the court and I feel very comfortable with this type of situation. I'm very happy."

Barbosa recently made national highlight reels in Chicago, as his team turned to his deft touch in the waning seconds of the game. "He (D'Antoni) made the play and I was not wide open, but I was a little bit open with the spacing," recalled Barbosa with a smile. "I was comfortable to shoot that shot and I did it. I did it a couple of times in Brazil. I knew it was too far, but all I was thinking at the time was 'Shoot the ball and make it.'

Barbosa has come a long way from selling fruits and vegetables in a farmer's market in Brazil to help support his family. For a guy who's faster than lightning, what can anyone expect to see from him in the second half of the season, besides more Phoenix wins?

If anyone could predict the future, if they could be fast enough to race ahead in time enough to see the future, it would be Barbosa. Instead, he'll stick with the short-term prognosis. "I just let everything happen," he says as he smiles that effervescent, yet humble grin of his.

"Just let everything come naturally, try and feel good about it, and always have fun."

Fun shows through in Leandro's game.

He is one of the Suns' keys to success, and has helped them take the entertainment factor up a notch.

# THE QUESTION

## How Important is All-Star Weekend?

### ▶▶ We asked the players...

"It's a real huge honor to be recognized as one of the top players and to get a chance to share the weekend with the other players who are recognized."

**Steve Nash, Phoenix Suns**

"I think, with myself, we're doing great as a team. And when you're doing great as a team, then the individual accolades come afterwards."

**Amare Stoudemire, Phoenix Suns**

"It's getting the best basketball players in the world and putting them on the same floor. It's the world's greatest competition. It's a weekend of celebration about the game. We get to showcase our skills to the world. It's fun."

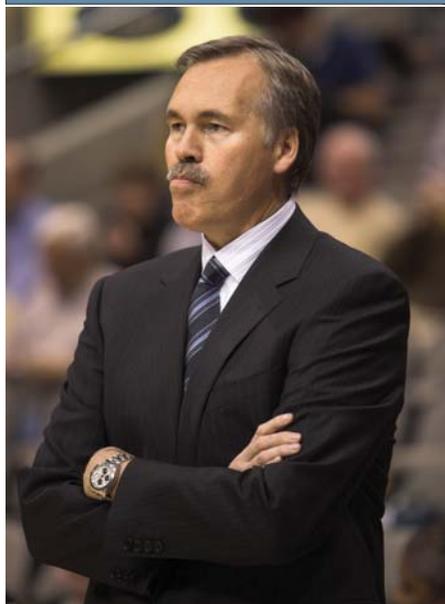
**Kobe Bryant, Los Angeles Lakers**

"I've been in that atmosphere my first and second year playing in the Rookie and The Sophomore games, I have seen how it is - you really don't get a break. It's a lot of ripping and running."

**Josh Howard, Dallas Mavericks**



### ▶▶ We asked the coaches...



"I think it's great for the fans, but for your veteran players rest is just as important. Hopefully they go there and get some rest. Rest is key for all free weekends."

**Dwane Casey, Minnesota Timberwolves (former)**

"All-Star Weekend is a fun weekend. It's something that just underlines how great they've been. Not everybody can make it all the time and there are some disappointments. We have three legitimate All-Stars."

**Mike D'Antoni, Phoenix Suns**

"Honestly, I would change it. I would change the whole mentality of the mid-season break and make it more competitive, come up with a tournament of some sort. I would actually try to get the players more rest, too. The people who go to the All-Star break don't get rest. They party, celebrate and get more tired."

**George Karl, Denver Nuggets**

"Absolutely nothing."

**Don Nelson, Golden State Warriors**



**SNAPSHOTS**

### Letting His Game Do All the Talking

By Wendell Maxey, Jr.

Don't expect Kevin Martin to talk your ear off before a game. The country boy with an awkward but effective touch is too focused. Besides, he prefers to let his play speak for him. Call it quiet confidence. For Martin each game is another step towards a lofty goal the virtual unknown aspired to after the Sacramento Kings drafted him out of Western Carolina in 2004: to be the best shooting guard on the planet. With that aspiration there is no need for further inspiration.

"I'm not one of those motivation-type players," Martin admits. "I just like playing the game of basketball. I've always enjoyed it, so wherever it was going to lead me I was going to make the best of the opportunity."

Don't let the soft-spoken demeanor fool you. The 23-year-old Martin knows exactly what he's doing. Now if only the rest of the world would pay attention.

"He leads them in scoring, right?" Jamal Crawford of the New York Knicks asks. "No one would have predicted that coming into it. He's a scorer and finds ways to score and is very efficient. Kevin's playing well and that's a credit to him that he's worked really hard."

It's hard to believe the 6'7", 190-pound Martin is already in his third year in the league because he often gets lost in the limelight of teammates Ron Artest, Mike Bibby, and Brad Miller. The fact is the Kings - a franchise that sent Peja Stojakovic packing last year and let free agent Bonzi Wells walk this past summer - would be lost without Martin's maturation into one of the league's best young talents.

"I knew I was going to have to step up and contribute more without Peja and Bonzi. Coach Eric

Musselman gave me the opportunity to show my offensive ability and they allow me to do that, so I feel good with the ball in my hands."

Despite his name being absent from the All-Star ballot, Martin is on pace to finish the season with a 20-point scoring average, shooting 50% or better from the field, 90% or better from the free-throw line, and 40% or better from three-point range. Boston Celtics' legend Larry Bird is the only player in NBA history to accomplish such an impressive feat.

With Martin chasing Larry Legend, it's hard to believe people neglect to praise him for being the best player on his own team and the most efficient shooting guard in the league.

"Whoever wants to notice it will notice it," says Martin. "I don't need all

that recognition as long as my teammates and my coaching staff realize what I am doing."

Those who truly know Martin believe it is his dedicated work ethic that parallels his goals and has given a newcomer out of Cullowhee, North Carolina a chance to show everyone who he is.

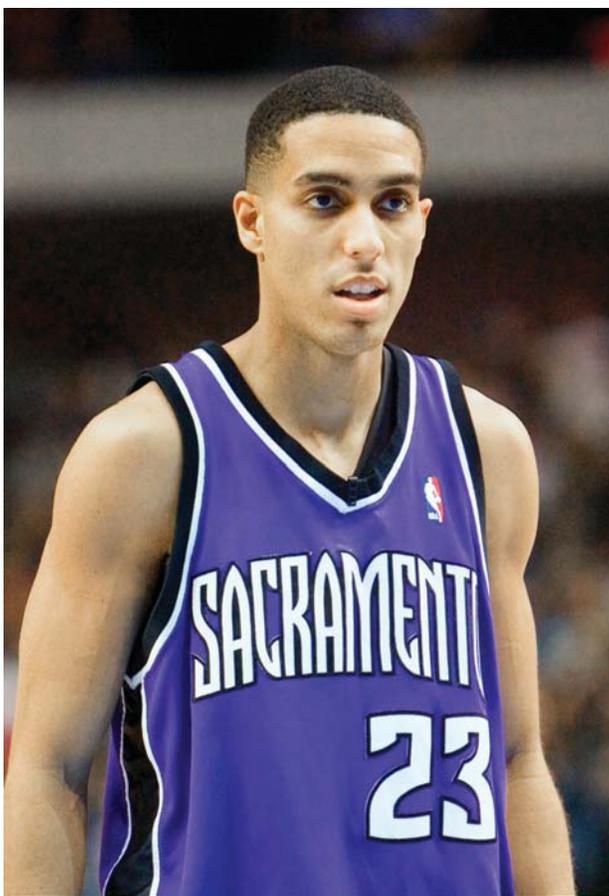
David Thorpe - Executive Director of the Pro Training Center in Clearwater, Florida - has been Martin's personal trainer since his sophomore year at Western Carolina and remembers the goals Martin set the summer he was drafted by the Kings.

"Kevin wanted to make the Kings' rotation and wasn't thinking long-term. I said let's give you a long-term goal more than just to be a good NBA player. What about being the best shooting guard on the planet? Kevin could only agree and his talent allows him to pursue that goal."

Thorpe says during the summer he and Kevin laid out very specific goals for this season.

"We set some pretty lofty goals: 16 to 18 points a game, 48% from the field, 40% from three, and 90% from the line. Not a lot of shooting guards can do that. He's real close to everything except he is scoring more," Thorpe says like a proud father.

Ask the average NBA fan outside of Sacramento who Kevin Martin is and they'll probably come up short. Those days may be numbered if he continues to work hard, set high long-term goals, and exceed those goals. He is on pace to have a fantastic season, but he won't tell you about it. Meanwhile, Martin will quietly go about the business of letting his fluid style of play tell everyone the best shooting guard on the planet has officially arrived.



### Cool, Comfortable, and Confident

By Preetom Bhattacharya

The play started with Mike Dunleavy, Jr. collecting a rebound on the defensive end of the court. Monta Ellis sprinted from the baseline and collected a leading pass from Dunleavy just before half court. Three seconds later, Ellis announced his presence to the league.

As he effortlessly galloped down the court, Ellis eyed Leandro Barbosa backpedaling in the paint and gathered himself to leap at the free throw line. He exploded off his left leg and thunderously gave Barbosa, one of the quickest players in the league, a reason to immediately regret his decision to contest a break-away dunk.

Hearing Ellis recount the play, though, one doesn't feel nearly as much excitement as the play deserves. "It was in the moment," shrugged Ellis. "I saw he was beyond the charge line and I just took off and he jumped and I dunked on him. That's all."

That's all? Although Ellis may look back at the moment more modestly, he permanently cemented himself into highlight reels for years with that play. Perhaps more impressive, though, is how his calm, cool, and collected nature permeated that single play.

"I never was the type of player to get emotional about stuff like that," Ellis said. "It was just a great play that I made."

Selected 40<sup>th</sup> overall in the 2005 Draft, Ellis was part of the last group of high school students eligible to take the express route to the NBA. Teams seemed scared off by scouting reports saying Ellis was too skinny, had a bad knee, and lacked a true outside jumper. "I listened to [the critics]," Ellis said. "But at the same time I know what I can do in terms of being a point guard or a small two guard, or just being a combo guard."

Ellis didn't get much playing time in his rookie year under then-coach Mike Montgomery. He logged 22 "Did Not Play – Coach's Decision" and only three appearances in the team's first 31 games

of the 2005-06 season, but he understood why. "Coming out of high school, second round pick, coach felt I wasn't ready," Ellis explained. He admitted the humbling experience was actually beneficial, saying that it caused him to "stay hungry and work even harder to prove him wrong."

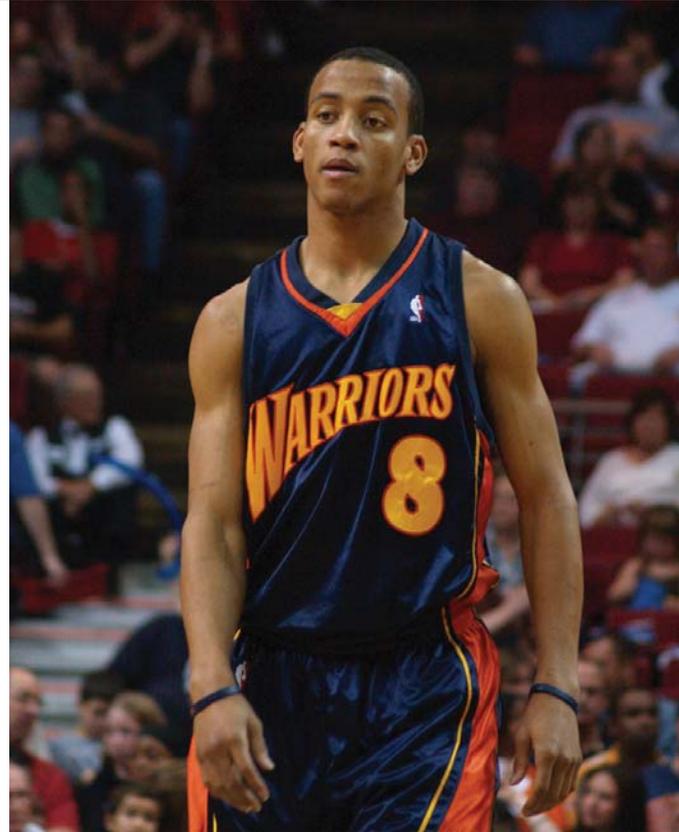
As Ellis looked to improve his game over the summer to earn playing time, the Warriors chose to let Montgomery go. They looked to their past to end their playoff drought, hiring former coach Don Nelson. Nelson's implementation of his high-octane offense has been the next step in Ellis's maturation.

"Monta's always been an incredibly fast player," Warriors veteran center Adonal Foyle said. "I think in Coach Nelson's offense, it's basically designed for Monta, which is just run, run, run. Given his natural skill in this offense, his emergence was almost inevitable because of the way coach is playing."

His play speaks for itself as far as his growth and Ellis attributes it all to being relaxed and at ease.

"My second season has been a lot better than my first, I feel more comfortable," he said. "Just the confidence that the coaches have in me and my ability to do the things that I do and everything is going smooth so far."

Nelson's system takes advantage of Ellis' greatest gift: his quickness. "He's one of the quickest guys in the NBA," former Warriors teammate Ike Diogu said. "There's not too many people that can stay in front of him." Nelson's use of his quickness has increased his production – roughly doubling his minutes and almost tripling his scoring average – with Diogu adding that now Ellis is "one of the go-to guys on this team."



Moreover, Ellis has benefited from being under the tutelage of Baron Davis, one of the most talented point guards in the NBA. "He has been like a big brother," says a beaming Ellis. "It's like all over again when I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and my oldest brother was playing ball. It's like a cycle, so he's just taken me under his wing, trying to show me the ropes."

So what does the master think of his student? Davis feels Ellis is on the verge of even bigger stardom. "He's great. He's one of the young, upcoming guards."

With everyone around him trusting his abilities, Ellis now is displaying the confidence and savvy of an NBA veteran. "He's seeing a lot more out there on the floor," Davis added. "He's got confidence and year by year you're going to grow and get more confident. That's what you're seeing in him."

With the Warriors striving to break their 12-year playoff drought, Monta Ellis has become a key contributor and will be a big part of how far the team goes this season . . . and for years to come.

# When Nice Guys Finish First

## Dwight Howard and a New Era in the NBA

By John Denton

His teammates call him “Young Fella,” and at the ripe old age of 21 Dwight Howard is in no position to answer the most frequently asked question. His teammates, coaches and opponents have no better insight.

But they all are intrigued, and from time to time, stopped in their tracks by one burning question.

“I don’t think anyone, including Dwight, knows just how good he will be someday,” Orlando Magic General Manager Otis Smith says.

Take one look at those Frankenstein-like shoulders, that freakish, kiss-the-rim athleticism and the aww-shucks, Boy Scout persona, and you get the feeling with Howard this is merely the start of something breathtaking.

What Howard is already – the NBA’s top rebounder and its top dunker – is something special to behold. When in full attack mode he is almost un-guardable for one defender in the low post. Just ask some of the NBA’s most rugged defenders such as Ben Wallace (surrendered 27 points), Kevin Garnett (gave up 21 points and 22 rebounds) and Emeka Okafor (was demolished to the tune of 24 points and 21 rebounds in three quarters of work).

When he’s in mid-air, foes scurry like ants getting out of the way of a size-18 sneaker. Sometimes he simply breaks the opposition’s will with his ability to get just about any rebound he wants, forcing them to clutch and grab the way a battered boxer might.

“That guy,” Los Angeles Lakers center Andrew Bynum said, shaking his head and pausing for effect, “is a physical freak.”

Cleveland’s Drew Gooden takes it a step further. “I think right now he’s the best center in the league,” Gooden said. “He rebounds, blocks shots and really finishes. He’s such a load, and he’s only going to get better.”

That Howard is the wobbly-legged colt still trying to find his way around the court is truly scary to some. His low-post game is still very much a work in progress and the mid-range



jump shot is but a rumor. Passing out of double-teams leads to turnovers in bunches at times and he can be knocked off his game from time to time by a center roughing him up physically.

Just minor chinks in the armor, teammate Keyon Dooling said: “Even Superman has his Kryptonite.”

Howard’s game is growing so steadily and rapidly even he is the first to admit that by season’s end he won’t be the same player he is now. With Shaquille O’Neal out most of this season, Howard has already developed into the Eastern Conference’s best center. It’s just a matter of time before he enters the rarified air breathed only by stars Tim Duncan, Kevin Garnett and Yao Ming.

But, Howard asks, why stop there? “I try not to focus so much on what I am right now, but what I

want to accomplish in the future,” Howard said. “I want to become a great player, one of the greatest to ever play the game. Everything I do now is geared toward me becoming a great player down the road.”

Howard’s off-the-charts potential is so high he has some in the NBA now wondering if he’s not the most dynamic young player in the league. None other than two-time Most Valuable Player Steve Nash said recently that if he could pick one player to start a franchise, it would be the 6-foot-11, 268-pound Howard. Somewhat shocking considering that LeBron James is almost universally thought of as the game’s brightest young star and Dwyane Wade already owns an NBA Championship ring and a June performance for the ages.

“You know, I’d put Dwight and LeBron’s names in a hat, put on a blindfold and whichever one that I picked, I’d be more than happy with either one,” Toronto Raptors coach Sam Mitchell said.

Larry Brown, back in the NBA as the Philadelphia 76ers’ President of Basketball Operations and one of the best talent evaluators the league has ever known, said Howard is

the kind of once-in-a-decade big man who will make the Magic a powerhouse for years to come. He even dared to bring Shaq into the conversation - a comparison O'Neal usually wins uncontested. There are similarities, Brown stressed.

"He reminds me a lot of Shaq when Shaq first came into the league. And like Shaq, he's going to get bigger and stronger," Brown said. "The difference is he has more of a defensive mindset, a rebounding mindset. The kid is going to give that Orlando franchise a chance to win a championship."

## Collision course with greatness

This collision course with greatness Howard is on hasn't come about by accident. The to-do list tacked to the wall of his boyhood bedroom looked like one a grown man might have come up with. Howard, however, was 12.

It read something like this:

1. Become the first overall pick in the 2004 NBA Draft. (Check)
2. Play in the NBA All-Star Game. (Check, as of this February)
3. Become one of the greatest players in NBA history. (Check back in about 20 years)

While reaching February's All-Star Game is old hat to some NBA veterans, Howard couldn't be more excited about the opportunity ahead of him. Surprisingly, he was snubbed last season even though he was leading the league in rebounding at the time. Now, in his third season, his appointment to the Eastern Conference All-Star team will be a dream fulfilled.

"I'd love to play in the All-Star Game because it's always been one of my goals," Howard said in January. "It's something that I've always wanted, but I've tried to put aside my personal goals and continue to play team basketball."

Howard's game and his life are fueled by his youthful, innocent energy, and in some ways he's still that teenaged boy in Atlanta with the big dreams.

He will gladly tell anyone that his favorite movie is *Finding Nemo*, and cartoons are still a big part of his daily routine. Veteran players looking to rest won't sit next to Howard on team charters because he's seemingly never tired or sleepy. He's the unofficial team prankster, hiding teammates' clothes in the locker room and wrestling with them in the hallways of the arena. And his loosey-goosey dance routines have become a regular at the end of each practice and before games, cracking up his teammates and coaches.

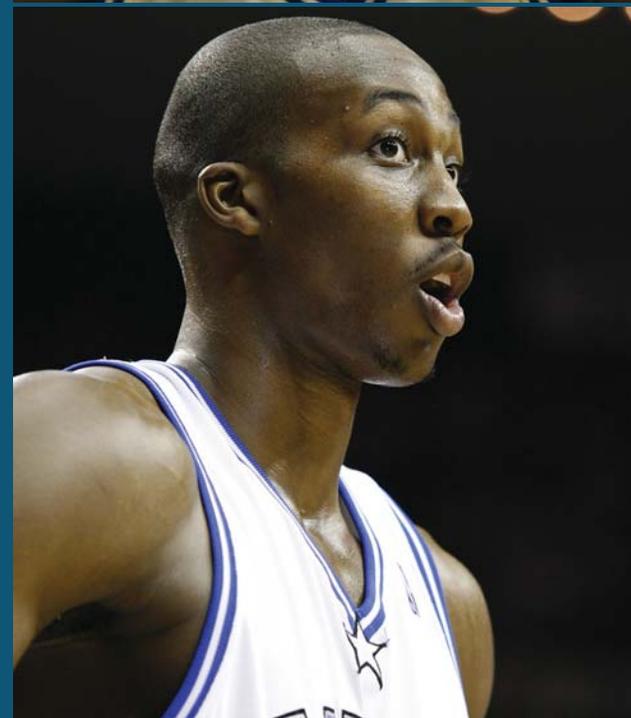
And then there's this: The deeply religious Howard said he's never tasted an alcoholic drink, and has no plans to do so. Even after turning 21 in December, Howard celebrated by eating a steak dinner with teammates and playing video games well past midnight.

Said teammate and close friend Jameer Nelson: "He's on a mission to become one of the best players of all time. He doesn't want to let anything stop him from reaching his full potential."

Foes such as the 76ers, one of the many teams that seem to bring out the best in Howard, are sometimes taken aback by his joking style. But Howard's just killing 'em softly.

"He's always smiling as he's getting offensive rebounds or dunking the ball and it kind of upsets you sometimes," coach Maurice Cheeks admitted. "But he's such a young kid and he's playing with so much energy. It's really something to see."

The Magic saw plenty in Howard before the 2004 NBA Draft, enough to make him the No. 1 overall choice. While many thought the Magic should have opted for Okafor, the proven product who



had just won an NCAA title at the University of Connecticut, the decision to select Howard was never really in doubt, Otis Smith said.

Especially not after the Magic witnessed Howard's insane leaping ability. The strip of tape, some 30 inches above the rim where Howard reached, still remains affixed to the side of the backboard at the practice facility some three years later. And Howard did that feat one better later, literally kissing the rim on a practice dunk.

The thought process went something like this: Okafor will be a solid player for several NBA seasons, but Howard has all the tools and mentality to someday be one of the greats of the game.

"It wasn't close at all to me," said Smith of the pre-draft comparisons between Howard and Okafor. "Maybe if Dwight wouldn't have been as mature as he was then maybe we would have thought twice about it. But that wasn't the case."

And now?

"It's still not even a debate to me," Smith continued. "I haven't changed my perception of it one bit. Dwight is still learning the game. He got thrown in the deep end and a lot was expected of him right away. He's handled it all pretty well, and he's still getting better every day."

## Bigger, Better, Badder

Howard is a different player now, in large part because his body is dramatically different. A skinny 240-pounder whose blue suit hung from his shoulders on draft night, Howard has transformed his body into one an NFL tight end would envy. With those enormous shoulders, 32-inch waist, six-pack abs and four percent body-fat index it's easy to see why Howard likes to walk around the locker room and practice facility strutting and flexing.

"Hey, Jameer, think I'd get fined for walking out of the arena like this?" a shirtless Howard asked before breaking out into laughter.

Howard grew up idolizing Kevin Garnett, hoping to someday emulate the Minnesota star's dazzling inside-out game. But through head coach Brian Hill's diligence, Howard has crafted his game more in the direction of Tim Duncan or Shaquille O'Neal.

"K.G. is more of a finesse player and I'm more of a power player. That's the change because we're two different players," Howard said. "I still like the way K.G. plays because he's aggressive like a center, but he moves like a guard."

"Really, I'm in the learning process and this should be my third year in college. I'm still working on my game. Three years from now I'll be a totally different player than I am now."

Aaron Goodwin, Howard's agent, noticed a difference in Howard's game and personality after he starred with Team USA this past summer at the World Championships. Almost suddenly, Goodwin said, Howard realized he belonged among

the best players in the world.

"Playing on that level and playing well with the other superstars in the league helped him understand he's an elite player as much as those athletes are," said Goodwin, one of the NBA's most influential agents. "A lot of this is so mental, and once you realize you are at that level, you see the confi-



dence coming from him. His future is so bright."

Brian Hill was the Magic's coach when O'Neal blossomed into a superstar center in Orlando. Hill said he still runs a couple of offensive sets he used during his first stint as the Magic's coach when O'Neal was anchoring the middle. Hill tries to avoid comparing Howard to O'Neal because the two play with different styles: O'Neal's game was/is based largely around his strength and size, while Howard uses his quickness and athleticism to make opposing centers look foolish.

There are times, however, when the comparisons are inevitable, Hill said. For instance, when Howard grabbed the nine offensive and 17 defensive rebounds against the 76ers last April, or when Howard went two feet above the rim and spiked a Ben Gordon shot like a volleyball earlier this year. Or even when he hit the miracle 3-pointer (the first of his career)

becoming the youngest rebounding champion in league history last season, getting edged out by Garnett. It's an honor he's expected to claim this season if he keeps going at his current rate.

Twice last season he recorded 20-point, 20-rebound games, making him the youngest in league history (19 years, 342 days) to accomplish the feat. He's followed that up with three more 20/20 games this season - two of them coming in consecutive games in November, making him the first to do so since Tim Duncan in March of 2003.

"He can get 20 rebounds in his sleep," Smith said. "The problem is all of our guys figure Dwight is going to get every rebound so they don't go after all the balls the way they should."

Given all he's already accomplished, it's strange to see that Howard's popularity is still somewhat below the radar. Part of that unquestionably comes with Howard playing in a small market like Orlando, and part of it is due to his Magic missing the playoffs in each of his first two seasons. That should end this season with Howard's Magic near the top of the Eastern Conference.

He would seem to be a marketer's dream with that megawatt smile, Greek God-like body, religious background and soaring star power on the court. Yet Howard doesn't have his own line of adidas shoes yet, and of the NBA's top 10-selling jerseys, Howard is nowhere to be found.

"I really think the rest of the country is missing the boat on this guy," said Magic radio analyst Will Perdue, who played with Michael Jordan in Chicago and Duncan in San Antonio. "He's starting to get some national attention now, but I don't think people know what they have in Dwight just yet. I see these commercials and they have Tracy McGrady and Kevin Garnett and Gilbert Arenas - and they're all really good players - but Dwight is every bit on their level. The nation has been slow to notice him, but they'll find out eventually."

Kobe Bryant, who knows a thing or two about star power, is quick to give Howard credit for being a rising star.

"He's so talented, maybe as talented as any big man in the league. Orlando has a hell of a talent in Dwight."

How good can he be? Wait until he becomes more than just a dunker; wait until he can hit that mid-range jumper. Then, Smith says, foes will be at Howard's mercy.

"We're beginning to see glimpses now of how good he truly can become," said the Magic GM. "Once he gets where he can make just 40 percent of those face-up jumpers, he's going to be even harder to guard. And once he really understands the game, watch out because he's going to be scary."



at the end of the half against Charlotte and flashed the smile of a kid who just saw a new bike under the Christmas tree.

"He does things like Shaquille that you say, 'Wow, that was a helluva play,'" Hill said.

## How Good Can He Be?

Howard has already made his mark on the NBA by becoming one of the league's finest rebounders. He just missed

## Waking Up from a Rookie Nightmare

By Wendell Maxey, Jr.

When you are a rookie playing for a struggling franchise, sleepless nights can haunt you as much as the losses. David Lee wanted to wake up from it all, but the New York Knicks' nightmare 2005-06 season swelled into an 82-game coma. Now in his second season, Lee has turned early disappointment into a source of motivation.

"Being a rookie there is so much to learn and I'm still learning a lot this year. I just feel so much more comfortable on the floor, especially defensively. It makes it easier because you have seen some of the situations and the players you are playing against. I've used that to my advantage."

The 6'9" forward stepped onto the floor at Madison Square Garden carrying a heavy cross after the Knicks selected him as the 30th overall pick in 2005. His coach at the University of Florida - and former Knick - Billy Donovan once called the St. Louis, Missouri native one of the best rebounders he ever coached. It's no wonder Knicks' fans wasted little time embracing the energetic Lee, who teamed with Channing Frye and Nate Robinson to form one of the most vibrant rookie trios in franchise history. This year is no different.

"New York fans have been notoriously tough to win over," Lee says about drawing the biggest ovation at the Garden these days. "They respect guys that play hard and obviously I appreciate it. That's what I try and do."

Lee wasted little time preparing for his sophomore season. Last summer Lee and Frye spent three months at the Knicks' training facility, where they worked five days a week with trainers on their low-post game and free-throw shooting. Coaches

pleaded with the dynamic duo to take a day off, but an obligation to turn things around in New York kept Lee and Frye from seeing much outside of the gym.

"You get better in the offseason. The rest has been picking things up this year from our veterans and playing against other teams while trying to get better. I want to help this

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“With me it is defense and rebounding. That’s where I can help our team the most.”

*David Lee*

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team win and I'm happy I can do that right now."

Thanks to this dedication, Lee is easily the Knicks' most improved player and it shows in his numbers. He leads the team in rebounding, ranks among the league's top rebounders, among the league leaders in field goal percentage, and averages a double-double.

Lee is usually the first option off the Knicks bench in head coach Isiah Thomas' rotation and frequently finds himself on the court at the end of the game. It's a true credit to Lee's hustle

and talent.

"Everyone on a team needs to figure out what they can contribute best to the team. With me it's defense and rebounding. We have plenty of great scorers. I just try to be an extra scorer in there when guys get double-teamed or through the natural progression of a play. As for the rebounding, that is where I can help our team the most."

Before the game you can always find Lee working with Knicks' assistant coach and former Detroit Piston Mark Aguirre. They work on low post moves and hitting jump shots, both things Thomas wants to see more from Lee.

"David is great and his rebounding is spectacular," Thomas admits. "Once he starts getting the confidence where he can make a foul line shot, the fifteen-foot shot is going to be there for him. We'll spend a lot of time practicing on it but I am happy to see him take that shot."

Thomas knows it's only a matter of time before Lee finds the ball in his hands with the game on the line.

"That shot, two months from now, is going to win a basketball game."

Lee knows it, too.

"That's the next step in my game, to work on by ball handling and my outside shooting. It's going to continue to be a priority for me and I'll work on it every single day. A lot of it is just confidence and believing in my shot."

At the start of the season Isiah Thomas spoke about the New York Knicks' need to be aggressive on the defensive end and on the boards. David Lee was all ears. Now the Garden favorite is steadily building a case to win the league's Sixth Man of the Year Award. That is one dream Lee doesn't want to wake up from.

### Understanding the Impact of a Role Model

By Bill Ingram

Jermaine O'Neal is known to the NBA world as a superstar on the court. What many people outside of Indianapolis may not know is he is also a superstar in the community. Twice O'Neal has been recognized with the NBA's Community Assist award, both times for his annual Christmas outreach.

"My Christmas charity is probably the most heart-filling," says O'Neal. "All those kids wouldn't have anything. A lot of the parents come up and thank me and they're crying. It bothers you to see people who don't have anything, and that's just a small group out of many people in the world. You look at our wars. It's costing billions of dollars to fix up other countries and people here in our own country are struggling. Why don't we spend those billions of dollars in our country? Our people are struggling, too."

Charities don't go away when the after-Christmas sales end, and neither does O'Neal's generous spirit. When he's not busy handing out presents O'Neal spends time at St. Vincent's Hospital.

"I go over there and that's a whole different feel. The most depressing part is that these people are struggling with life and death issues and they still find a way to tell me my stats and tell me things about *my* life. Every year I kind of have to get myself together and I tell my wife I'm going to do my best not to get emotional in front of those people. There's nothing like that. There's nothing like seeing those people come out there and some of them barely have clothes; they have bad rashes all over their bodies. Then you go into the hospital and see people hooked up to these ventilators . . . it makes you appre-

ciate life. It takes a small part of my life to go and just say 'I'm here for you.' It helps me sleep better at night to know that I've made some small difference."

O'Neal's heart for giving is rooted in his experience of growing up in an area that was disadvantaged, but also in the example that was set for him by a former NBA superstar.

"I was raised in a community that

what kind of house you live in, what kind of car you have, what type of clothes you wear. If you set your goals high enough to can achieve anything you want to achieve. I really focus on being a mentor and being in the community and that means a lot to kids.

"My mother raised me to make sure that you understand people's problems," O'Neal continued. "I'm always a big person to not just issue out money, but also to issue out time. You can issue out an ear, a shoulder for people to cry on. That's what I do. I take my own money, I don't get sponsorships. I take my own money and buy stuff for kids just to show them that I do care and I do hear them."

Just as O'Neal's mother had a lasting impact on his life, the Pacers' star is now starting to fully understand the impact he has on his own daughter. He's facing the fact he has someone higher up to answer to, even though she's quite a bit smaller than he is.

"I have to be a leader in my own household first. The first time I realized the impact I have on kids' lives was when I got involved in the (brawl) in Detroit and had to explain that

to my five-year-old daughter. I told her daddy was in a difficult situation, very difficult. I wished it hadn't happened. I didn't really get into the entire thing, but I let her know that it was a bad situation and that I learned from it. Right or wrong, I learned from it. It shows you the importance of your impact as a role model, whether you like it or not."

Jermaine O'Neal's play on the basketball court makes him an NBA All-Star, but it's the way he embraces the community with his heart and soul that makes him an All-Star off the court . . . and at home.



didn't have very much, so my community work is based on things that I went through. I know that it's a struggle every day for a lot of people, so I try to always remember that I have to give back to the community and help people who don't get help from anyone else. I was fortunate enough to have guys like Xavier McDaniel who came and got us and bought us shoes and uniforms for our AAU team. It gave us a chance to breathe and that's what it's all about – letting these kids know that they have a chance to succeed no matter where they stay,

# ALL-STAR



## Did You Know...

- Michael Jordan is the all-time leading scorer in All-Star games with 262 points. Oscar Robertson has the highest average, with 20.5.
- Kareem Abdul-Jabbar played in the most All-Star Games with 18 appearances. Tied for a distant second at 13 games are Wilt Chamberlain, Bob Cousy, John Havlicek, and Michael Jordan.
- The Boston Celtics lead the NBA with 122 player selections for 28 different players. The Charlotte Bobcats have had none – and the Memphis Grizzlies got their first in 2006 with Pau Gasol.
- The record for most appearances by a pair of teammates is 7, held by Elgin Baylor and Jerry West. Both were All-Star starters as Los Angeles Lakers seven times; in 1962-65, 1967-68, and 1970.
- 43 rookies have appeared in an All-Star game; 16 of them have started. The last rookie starter was Yao Ming in 2003.
- 16 players have been named All-Stars both as a player and as a head coach. Isiah Thomas was the most recent as head coach of the Indiana Pacers in 2003.
- Dikembe Mutombo is the only player named as an injury replacement to an All-Star Game twice, in 1995 and 2001. Shaquille O’Neal has been replaced three times: 1997, 2001, and 2002.
- The East leads the all-time results, 33-21.
- Jason Richardson, Harold Miner, Dominique Wilkins, and Michael Jordan are the only players to win the Slam Dunk title twice.
- Larry Bird and Craig Hodges have both won the Three-Point Shootout three times; Peja Stojakovic, Mark Price, and Jeff Hornacek each won it twice.

## The 1951 All-Star Game

The decision to hold the NBA’s first All-Star Game was not a popular one. It was the brain-child of NBA publicist Haskell Cohen, and if it hadn’t been for Boston Celtics owner Walter Brown, who agreed to host the game, it probably wouldn’t have happened.

“I thought the All-Star Game would be a good thing,” said Brown. “I told the league I would take care of all the expenses and all the losses if there were any.”

Most people didn’t want to be involved. The creation of several leagues had been attempted and failed, so a venture like this was risky. In the week leading up to the game the commissioner asked Brown repeatedly to call off the game, but Brown wasn’t hearing it.

10,094 fans came to the Boston Garden to see the Eastern Conference All-Stars – led by Boston’s game MVP Ed Macauley’s 20 points – trounce the Western Conference 111-94. Alex Groza of the Indianapolis Olympians led the West with 17 points and 13 rebounds.

11 Hall of Fame members played in that game: Macauley, Fulks, Arizin, Dolph Schayes, Cousy, Andy Phillip, Harry Gallatin, Bob Davies, Mikan, Vern Mikkelsen, and Jim Pollard.

Considering the spectacle that the NBA’s All-Star Game is today, it’s safe to say Walter Brown was a true visionary.



**SNAPSHOTS**





# Leading the League to a New Frontier

## Rick Kamla: The NBA's Face of Fantasy Basketball

By Tommy Beer

Ask people who take fantasy basketball seriously and they will tell you it requires a near full-time commitment. Running a successful fantasy team means countless hours spent pouring over statistics and agonizing over difficult roster decisions. During the grind of a taxing season most Fantasy GM's search for a dependable guide to lead them through the fantasy wilderness. Rick Kamla, host of *NBA TV Fantasy Hoops*, is the shepherd of his fantasy flock.

Seven days a week Kamla invites his audience to join him as he navigates the NBA's fantasy landscape. His passion and dedication for the game is obvious during each and every broadcast where his enthusiasm, coupled with extensive knowledge, has earned him a devout following.

Kamla's love for the game of basketball was instilled at a young age, but it wasn't until his college days when he heeded the fantasy hoops calling.

"I was in a league in my fraternity at the University of Minnesota. 1989 was the first year and I have been playing ever since," said Kamla.

After graduating he went to work for a fantasy website. After years of pumping out insightful articles he began to develop a following within the growing fantasy basketball community. One of his readers happened to have a little pull and Kamla's journey took a turn.

"Bryan Meyers, who is a senior director with NBA TV, read one of my articles and he liked it, so I came on for just a guest hit with (NBA TV). I did a few of those and we stayed in touch. Then maybe six or eight months later they brought me in for a screen test. That was December of 2002. Quickly thereafter, in January of 2003, I started the fantasy show with them. It was an incredible turn of events."

Kamla can remember being excited about the opportunity, but also recalls the pressure he faced as he stood in front of the camera for the first time.

"I was extremely scared. I had done some TV before, but this was a big TV studio, stage managers, three cameramen, and a producer in my ear. It was crazy," Kamla said about the show's premier broadcast. "I remember the stage manager saying, 'Five seconds to air,' and I was just thinking to myself, 'I better not suck!' But I went out there and I think I had a pretty good show."

In the beginning the programs were often scripted, but through the growing process and exposure on NBA TV Kamla has learned to simply be himself.

"For that show I had everything written out. I am adlibbing most of my stuff now, but for that show I didn't want to fall flat on my face. I have been challenging myself more – each year I am writing less and less, which has been helping me in all walks of broadcasting."

Unbeknownst to him at the time there were NBA executives on the set to assess the show and his ability to host it. "There were a couple of producers there, I didn't even know it at the time, but they thought I did a pretty good job on show number one and it just kind of got better from there."

Ask fantasy junkies who follows hoops religiously and they will tell you "better" is an understatement. Originally called *Gatorade Virtual GM*, the show began to develop a cult following. Over the years viewers have come to rely heavily on Kamla's divinely-inspired advice. As the program attracted a following NBA executives were quick to offer their support, but even Kamla knows there were some skeptics in the crowd.

"I think when they first brought me in it was experimental and more of a 'we'll just see how this goes' kind of thing. But every year it's gotten better."

While ratings continue to improve, the proliferation of fantasy hoops on NBA.com has been astounding. "Two years ago NBA.com made a commitment and they made a huge fantasy push on the website (Kamla writes a popular weekly column, *Living the Fantasy*). They created a fantasy page that wasn't just mail-in stuff. They brought in good fantasy writers and started filling it up with content. Then this year, with their Ultimate Fantasy Commissioner, they have taken it to a totally different level. I expect that every year the fantasy section will grow by leaps and bounds. They are totally on board with it. David Stern is obviously feeling it and he believes in it or else it wouldn't be happening."

No wonder the commissioner himself and officials from all the major sports are buying into the fantasy market. According to CNN's *Money.com*, between 15 million and 18 million people play fantasy sports in the U.S. - and the number of players has grown 7-10 percent a year for the past three years.

Acutely aware of this popularity, Kamla is incredibly impressed by the NBA's ability to stay ahead of the curve. At the same time, he is mystified by the lack of foresight exhibited by executives within the NFL.

"The NBA is a pioneer in a lot of ways and it's unbelievably cool to me that they had this idea to do a fantasy show. Obviously it has created a career for me and that has gone beyond my imagination. I mean I didn't even think about doing a fantasy show; *they* came to *me* with the idea. What is bewildering to me is that the NFL Network doesn't have at least a half-hour fantasy show. Bewildering probably isn't even the right word. It's shocking, it's embarrassing... It just blows my mind. I mean, fantasy football is king. It's so much bigger than fantasy basketball. 100 times bigger? Maybe 1,000 times? I don't even know what the number is."

Although Kamla is an ardent supporter of fantasy hoops, he readily admits there are inherent limitations likely to prevent basketball from ever eclipsing football on the fantasy map. He believes the future of fantasy hoops will expand, but he does not foresee "exponential growth."

"I just don't see it becoming as popular as fantasy football. I would rather lie to you and paint a rosier picture, but the setup in fantasy football is just so perfect. Most (fantasy football players) are not hardcore guys. They are in an office league or they are in a league with their buddies. They care about it, but they don't live it.

"In fantasy football you have 'fringe' guys and casual fans that

play. There are very few, if any, casual basketball fans that play fantasy hoops. If you are playing fantasy hoops, you are a complete, hard-core, freak and nut. Fantasy basketball is every day. A lot of times it's ten games a day. You just have to love it. I think you can *like* football and play fantasy football. I don't think, at least most of the time, the people that play fantasy hoops *like* basketball. You have to *love* basketball to play fantasy basketball."

Kamla confesses he also finds time to sample from other dishes at the fantasy buffet. "I am a huge fantasy football guy and I always will be. I actually just won the biggest championship in my fantasy football career. My main league is 14-team league and I had lost in the championship round twice before. But I finally got it done this year, so that was ultimately satisfying!" he exclaimed.

However, there is a fine line where fantasy nears addiction and even Kamla admits a line must be drawn, even if it is the sand. "I used to play fantasy baseball but now I just need a break, so I don't play it anymore. I still love baseball but during the summer I don't want to be on the computer clocking relief pitchers. I would rather be at the beach with my kids."

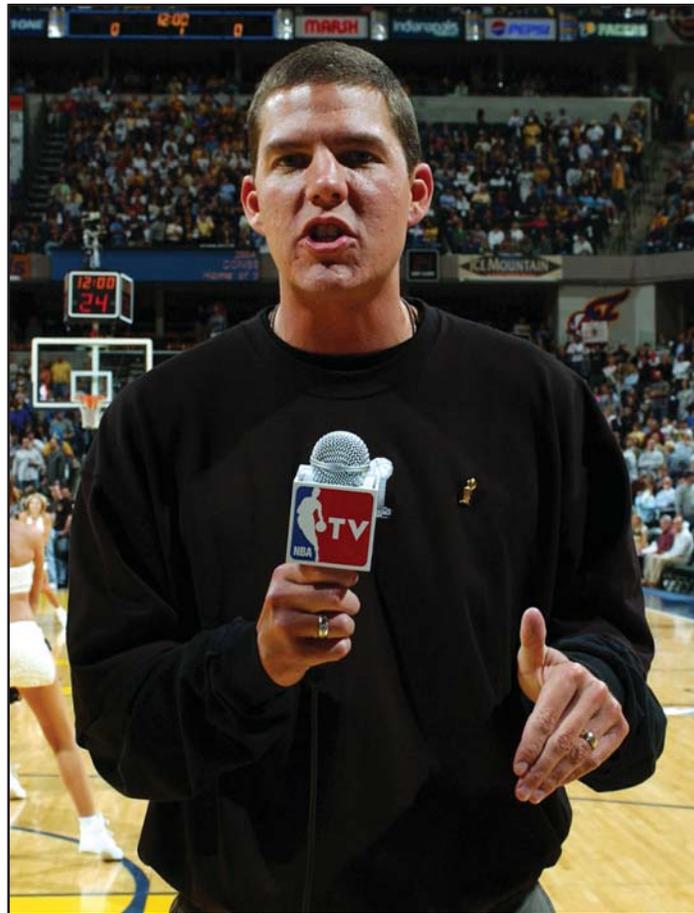
From October to April fantasy hoops demands strict attention from those who aspire to be crowned champion. Kamla understands this all too well. While he was once bogged down by joining too many leagues, he has learned there really can be too much of a good thing.

"I am a quality over quantity guy. There were times in the past where I had been in six football leagues, five basketball leagues, and three baseball leagues. It's nonsense. I have two kids now and I just don't have time for it anymore. My

main basketball league is 98% of my focus. The guys that are in my league are obsessed by it, they love it, they look forward to it, and they miss it when we are not playing it. They consider a championship a real, real big deal and I do as well. It's arguably the greatest league in the world, and I say that with all humility."

In order to win such a competitive league, Kamla has to be on top of his game. To keep his viewers and readers happy he has to be accurate and clairvoyant. While clearly that's not always possible, he has made some good picks he remembers.

"This year a really good example would be Deron Williams. I was very high on him coming in. Actually, I took him with the third pick of the fifth round and when I made the pick I got a lot of crap from guys in my league about it. They were all, 'Oh! Kamla



is reaching!' But, hey how do you like me now? So yeah, I really nailed it with Deron."

Fantasy hoops isn't an exact science. It's a game which lends itself to incorrect conjecture. Even Kamla, a seasoned veteran, has made woeful predictions. "Last year I did not do well with my sleepers. Zach Randolph and Carlos Boozer were two of my main sleepers. It turns out I was a year early on those two guys. They came in hurt and they just weren't ready. But learning from that, it caused me to tell everyone not to take Jason Richardson this season."

Kamla realizes chasing fantasy perfection is an effort in futility and, despite the minor setbacks, he is constantly learning. "You know, I am still getting better every year. Just because I have been in the biz 10 years, I definitely don't know everything. I still make mistakes. I was down on Kobe Bryant coming in and told people not to take him but he has obviously made me eat those words. But Kobe is in another stratosphere, one of the greatest of all time. I doubted him and I regret it."

What Rick certainly does not regret is getting involved with NBA TV. The exposure from the Fantasy Show has opened many doors. Rick now does play-by-play for NBA TV's Euroleague game of the week and also hosts Basketball International. Kamla also recently landed a gig on Sirius Satellite Radio's NBA channel where he co-hosts a weekday program with Hall-of-Famer Rick Barry.

"It has been awesome. I had done a little bit of radio before and I had co-hosted, but on a much smaller scale back in Minneapolis. I have always known that radio was something I could be pretty good at. I am opinionated, come on strong, and generate a love/hate response from people. So it was always something I really wanted to do and I am kinda rocking at it a little bit."

Much of the appeal for the show comes from the interaction between the highly-caffeinated Kamla and the more subdued Barry.

"Rick Barry is the bomb. I love working with him. On a broadcast, you want a straight guy as well as a kinda wacky guy," Kamla explains. "I think there is a good dichotomy. I am sort of the outspoken, new-school guy and Barry is out-spoken himself.

He is old-school and a little more mellow than me. I think we play off each other well."

The two opposites don't always disagree. Kamla and Barry see eye-to-eye on most topics. "We actually agree most of the time, which is kind of shocking. But when we do disagree, it's awesome. We go at it! I don't pander to him because he is a Hall-of-Famer. I dig in the trenches and it is warfare when we disagree."

The best perk for Kamla has been the opportunity to pick the brain of one of the 50 Greatest Players in NBA history. "I am a sponge when it comes to hoops. I eat it all up; I love everything involved with the orange. The one thing that is kind of deficient and lacking is my knowledge of NBA history. I started following hoops when Magic Johnson came into the league. I don't know the 70's, 60's or 50's. So working with Rick Barry has really increased my knowledge of those eras. Now I have a greater understanding of just how insane Wilt Chamberlain was. And Bill Russell, and Hal Greer, and Jerry West and Gail Goodrich. All these guys, you know their names but you don't quite understand how great they were."

The future for Rick Kamla may be different than many might expect.

"I don't want to completely leave fantasy. But, ultimately, I have always wanted to be the play-by-play voice for an NBA team. That has been my goal

since I was a teenager. Magic was my hero growing up. Well, I actually had different heroes in different genres. Magic was my sports hero; Jerry Garcia was my musical hero; Hunter S. Thompson was my literary hero; and Brent Musburger was my broadcast hero. So I have always looked up to Brent and wanted to be like him. In fact, my play-by-play is little bit like him.

"Right now I am happy where I'm at and I have the gig of a lifetime, but down the road I would love to be the voice of a team. But I would still love to write about fantasy even if I couldn't do the show anymore. I love fantasy and I will always be playing no matter what goes on."

While the fantasy community hopes Rick Kamla hosts *NBATV Fantasy Hoops* forever, they can take heart in knowing that he will never stray too far away...



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### All-Star Weekend Has Everyone's Attention

By Nikola Olic

It starts with a "Vote Now" in the style of a retro Las Vegas commercial from the seventies. After starting in English, the web advertisement finally comes to a stop ten seconds and some 20 languages later. In that time fans from most of the 37 countries represented in the NBA were told in their native tongue how they can do their part to send their favorite players to the All-Star game. Just like this year's host Las Vegas, the All-Star Game always has a strong international appeal and provides a unique global inspiration.

The San Antonio Spurs unquestionably are the most successful team with the highest percentage of international players. This gives Head Coach Gregg Popovich a unique perspective among his peers.

"If you think about it, especially for the foreign kids – Manu grew up in awe of the NBA, watching all these players and getting late night tapes and films and watching them. Now they're in that same league playing and those guys are on their right and on their left and it was a wonderful, wonderful thrill. They probably were more thrilled by it than the American kids because it's so awesome for them."

"For me it was one of my career highlights," confirms Ginobili, a 2005 All-Star. "That was something that I never expected to play in and I did, so I enjoyed it a lot. I really couldn't believe being in there. I will be honored to have done that for the rest of my career. I never expected to play in an All-Star game. The day I was told I just couldn't believe it. I really enjoyed the whole experience."

While not all players agree the NBA is necessarily the best league in the world, it is simply a matter of fact it is the most exhausting. Six months, 30 different towns and 82 games add up to a season twice as taxing on the body as anything any other league can throw a player's way. It's no surprise the All-Star week-

end is as much an opportunity to shine as it is an opportunity to relax.

"There is no better way to spend the weekend," explains the Spurs' Beno Udrih, who attended the 2006 All-Star game. "I remember the posters on my wall, they were from an old All-Star game. I started playing basketball when I was smaller than the poster. Any chance I get to be an inspiration for some other kid back in Slovenia or anywhere else in the world, I'll do it."

Igor Kokoskov has already made it to

ever leaving the continent.

The NBA will credential 500 media outlets from all over the world to cover the All-Star game. Danijela Draganic helps the NBA oversee international media, meaning she makes sure that everybody gets what they need, no matter the language, alphabet or player. During All-Star weekend, her department is busier than normal.

"There is a big spike in NBA interest around the world during the All-Star weekend," says Draganic. "Broadcast-

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“I really couldn't believe being in there. I will be honored to have done that for the rest of my career. I never expected to play in an All-Star game.”

*Spurs guard Manu Ginobili*

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the All-Star game as an assistant coach with the Detroit Pistons so he is making sure not to miss it again. Even if he has no official duties this year in Las Vegas, he is planning on being a part of the festivities and having a good time.

Others are less enthusiastic. "All-Star weekend? No, no...I am going to Disneyland!" joked Slovenian and Toronto Raptor Rasho Nesterovic.

The main reason most international players join their respective national teams is for the chance to represent their country's basketball around the world. Their summers are completely booked and they play warm-up tournaments all around the world. All-Star is a way of doing the exact same thing, but without

ers that normally don't cover the NBA are interested in at least covering the All-Star weekend. This year it is going to be really big. During the All-Star weekend, the whole NBA arena is really ours and we are here to provide our international partners with whatever they need."

Requests range from arranging interviews with David Stern to bringing Nenad Krstic courtside to do play-by-play for Macedonian TV. It is not rare that a full alphabet of celebrities, from Anna Kournikova to Jay-Z, would be appearing at an All-Star game. Danijela and the rest of the NBA want to make sure that what happens in Las Vegas does NOT stay in Las Vegas.



## Preparing For the NBA's Big Gala

By Greg White

Back in August 2005, when NBA Commissioner David Stern chose the Thomas and Mack Center on the UNLV campus in Las Vegas as the site of the 2007 All-Star Game, NBA players and fans alike got a little more excited for the NBA's big weekend. After all, Las Vegas *is* the fun capital of the United States...but is an arena mostly used for UNLV basketball games really ready to pull off this extravaganza?

The thought of choosing a non-NBA city to host its All-Star event raised some eyebrows. The fact Vegas has made noise about wanting an NBA team probably had something to do with it. You could assume that hosting the All-Star game is a sort of test run for the NBA and Las Vegas, alike. After the casinos agreed to remove the All-Star game from the sports books, you could say that it was a match made in heaven. After all, the NBA All-Star game is much more than a game. As the Thomas and Mack Center's Facility Director, Daren Libonati, put it: "We liken it to a huge TV show production, and three accidental basketball games broke out."

Those three accidental basketball games happen to be the three-day event known as All-Star Weekend, set to take

place February 16-18th. There is the Rookie Challenge on Friday night, All-Star Saturday which will feature the Shooting Stars, the Skills Challenge, the Three-Point Shootout, and the Slam Dunk Contest, and the All-Star Game on Sunday.

Las Vegas is well equipped to handle huge events. The New Year's Eve celebration attracts more than 300,000 people, a myriad of boxing events, and the annual Wrangler National Finals Rodeo - which attracted a total of over 175,000 over 10 days - to name a few. With the city's more than 133,000 hotel rooms, they are more than ready for the crowd. "We get so many large events, and unique events ranging from fights to the rodeo, that we have lots of experience," echoed Libonati.

Still, after taking a step back you start to wonder if the Thomas and Mack Center is up to par for such a worldwide showcase.

"Even though we are 23 years old, we have kept our building up. We had several meetings with the NBA and understand their needs. The NBA hired a professional production company to help produce the event," added Libonati.

"The NBA is bringing their own sound

and lights. We don't have today's Jumbotron, so we will raise ours to the roof and the NBA will bring in a four-screen display. The transition will be tough, but we have a great plan to facilitate everything from the media, to transportation, to the hospitality."

One of the biggest issues is tickets. Las Vegas is known for comps for their high rollers. With the NBA All-Star game being a must-see event, handling the amount of requests should be a challenge. Libonati explains the easy resolution. "Everyday I get at least 5-10 phone calls for tickets. Normally, I can just accommodate them, but the NBA made it very easy in that there are no seats to give. That's up to the NBA to decide how they will handle their inventory, as well as the Las Vegas Convention Authority to figure out what to do with their block of tickets they purchased."

The only issue Libonati did have to make concessions on was for the 30 suite owners. The suite owners are normally entitled to the use of their suite for any event at the Thomas and Mack Center. In this case, the use of the suites goes to the NBA. "We reached out to them, offered them an opportunity to have the same number of seats they have in their suites, or a value for the seats."

With an arena seating over 18,500 people, accommodating the crowd isn't an issue. Accommodating the over 1000 expected media members will be. "We will have to displace some of our seating, build tables and chairs for the media, and increase the media area. We will push some bleachers back, and put in stages. Our locker rooms are small, but we have a lot of them," said Libonati.

With the Las Vegas Convention Authority taking care of everything except the basketball game, Libonati added that his focus is the game. "Our space limitations are going to allow many of the hospitality places such as hotels and the convention center to handle the other events (NBA Jam Session, press conferences, etc.). Our focus is as a game facility location. Everything else will be done in the beautiful city of Las Vegas."



## Making Reggie's Legacy His Own

By Bill Ingram

When the Detroit Pistons eliminated the Indiana Pacers in the 2004 Eastern Conference Finals it was more than the end of a potential championship run for the Pacers. It was the end of the Reggie Miller era, but even as Miller took his exit he appointed the man who would take his place. He took the Pistons' Rip Hamilton by the hand and told him it was his turn to carry the mantle.

"That was great," beams Hamilton. "I watched him while I was growing up, trying to read the way that he uses screens and the way he plays the game of basketball. He could have played another five years if he wanted to. I envy the guy. I played against him in the playoffs and played against him his last game. It was amazing for him to say that to me. It let me know that all the hard work I've been doing is starting to pay off."

Pistons forward Dale Davis had the privilege of playing with Reggie in his prime and notes that the similarities between Reggie and Rip are numerous.

"They're very similar. I think one of the great things about Reggie was moving without the ball. In the NBA today I don't see anyone who's even close to being as good at moving without the ball as Rip. Rip is a great scorer, probably the most dangerous player in the game coming off screens and attacking the seams. From that standpoint they're very similar."

"Rip plays with a lot of energy, a lot of confidence," says Pistons head coach Flip Saunders. "He's as confident as any player in the league. He's a leader, and more than anything else he's his own player with his own identity. He's not trying to live up to being a Reggie Miller or anyone else. He's an All-Star in his own right, and he and Chauncey (Billups) make up one of the best backcourts in

the league."

Indeed, the Pistons' backcourt is a mutual admiration society. Their chemistry and efficiency on the court is matched only by their friendship off the court. Chauncey Billups offered his explanation



as to why he and Rip have been so effective in tandem.

"I think Rip and I feed off one another like no others do. I feed off of his energy and his tenacity out there and he feeds off of my calmness and my poise. I'm able to settle him down and he's able to get me going. It's like a perfect marriage. I wouldn't like playing with anyone else in the league better than playing with Rip. We bring out the best in each other."

The clutch portion of any Pacers game came to be known as "Miller Time," so named because it was the time when Reggie Miller was sure to take over the game. Aside from his deadly three-point

jumper, Miller's defining characteristic was something Billups now identifies in his backcourt partner.

"Confidence," he says without a moment's hesitation. "I think the great thing about me and Rip is that we both don't need the ball in our hands at all times of the game. A lot of times when you try to match up a great two guard and a great point guard they both need to dominate the ball. Rip's great with the ball and great without it so we kind of feed off of each other."

Tayshaun Prince has grown up as a pro with Rip as a role model. Prince says there is another aspect of Rip's game that his teammates and coaches universally recognize.

"He's just an energy guy, especially on the offensive end. How he goes is how our offense goes. We set a lot of screens for him to get him open because he's the best midrange player in the game. Whenever we get him open it's an easy bucket."

The mark of a true All-Star is bringing it every night. Sure, there will be nights when the ball isn't dropping, but the effort and energy can't waiver. Like Reggie Miller, Rip understands the importance of perseverance.

"I just try to attack every game like it's my last. I try to get focused every game. Kevin Garnett told me when I first came into the league that you always have to find different things every game to keep you going, keep you motivated, get you hyped. I try to do that every game."

Rip was an All-Star before Reggie Miller made his symbolic gesture. He also already had the one thing that evaded Reggie: an NBA championship. It's clear that Miller's legacy is in good hands – and that it will be bigger and better when it comes time for Rip to pass it along.

**SNAPSHOTS**



# Denver's Transformer

## How Allen Iverson is Turning Negatives into Positives

By Travis Heath

Today's mass media thrives on negativity and no one knows that better than the Denver Nuggets' newcomer Allen Iverson. Take, for example, the number of times you saw the infamous "We talkin' bout practice" clip on television, which now causes Iverson to simply chuckle and roll his eyes. Upon his arrival in Denver, on the heels of a nasty brawl in Madison Square Garden, Iverson saw the negativity coming from a mile away.

Will the Nuggets be able to overcome the now infamous brawl?

Will Carmelo Anthony and Iverson be able to co-exist?

Will Iverson get Coach George Karl fired?

The doubters and their subsequent questions can be seen lined up for miles.

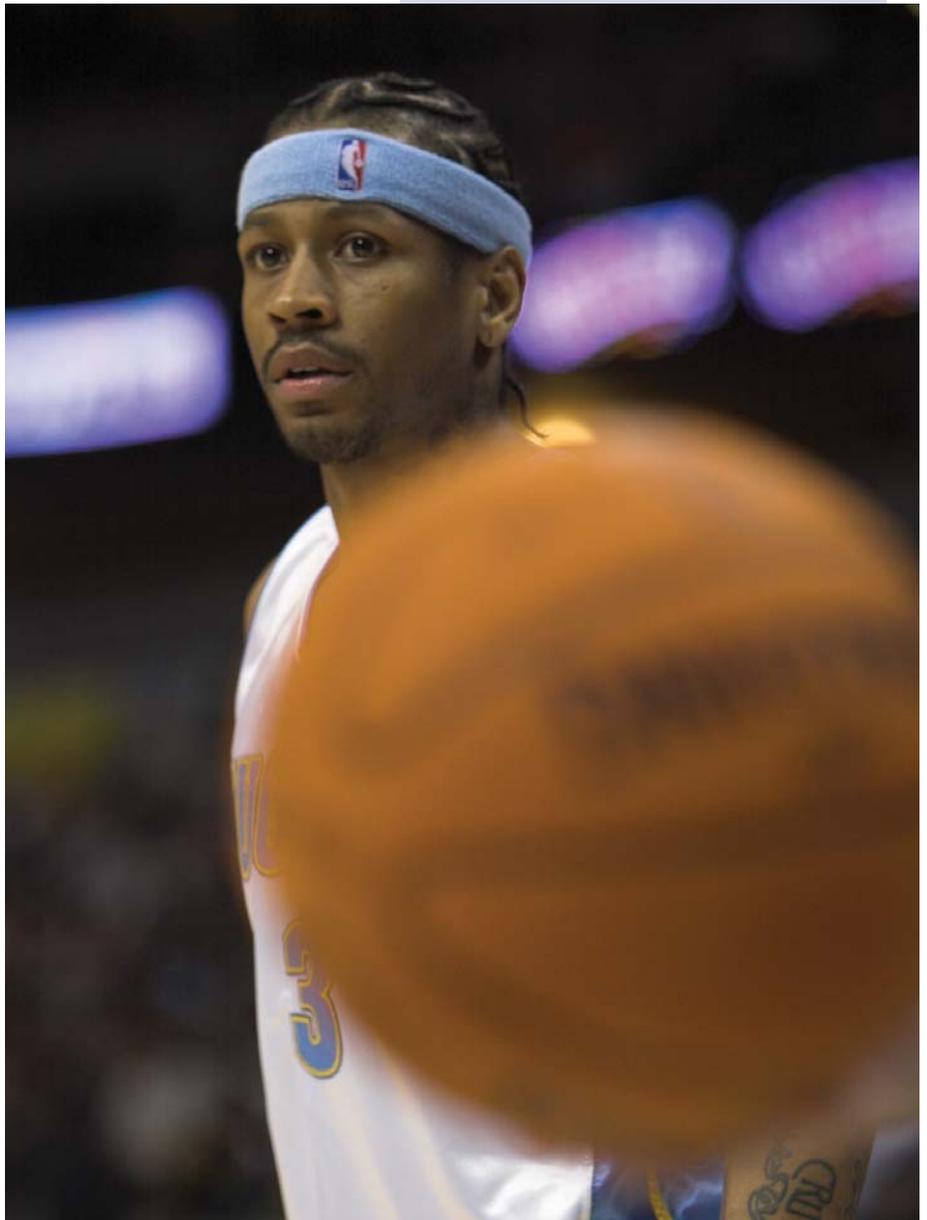
"Why wouldn't people doubt us? Saying that we can do it is not going to sell anything," Iverson said with a laugh. "Negativity sells in this world. Anything negative that is going on is what people want to talk about it. You don't want to talk about charity events or anything good you do in the community. You'd rather talk about terrorists and deaths and stuff like that. That's what sells the most. People don't want to hear anything positive, so that's something you expect."

Despite the negativity, "The Answer" appears ready to silence his critics and put to rest some of the myths surrounding both him and his new team.

"That's what being a basketball player and being a person is all about," Iverson asserted. "You get a chance to prove people wrong if you feel they are wrong."

### **Myth #1: Iverson the Malcontent**

Iverson came to Denver with a reputation – whether fair or not – of being a less than desirable teammate. This reputation caused more than a few folks to be instantly skeptical about whether or not he would be able to thrive in Denver.



Once he arrived in The Mile High City though, a funny thing happened; all of his teammates quickly grew to love him.

"He's been great," explained teammate Eduardo Najera. "His leadership is something we've been lacking on this team. Overall, he's been a great teammate and he's been great around the locker room. I think that he's going to help everybody — especially the young guys like Carmelo and J.R. (Smith)."

"He's a great teammate," added Captain Marcus Camby. "He's been supportive of everybody, even the twelfth man on the team. So he's definitely going to be a good asset for us."

Still, Nugget players must have caught wind of Iverson's reputation before his arrival in Denver, right?

"I didn't really pay attention to any of that," Najera said. "What he's showing right now is totally the opposite of what you read in the papers. You've got to respect that because he's a great guy."

Like Najera, guard Steve Blake - who was acquired by the Nuggets not long after Iverson - didn't pay any attention to the reputation Iverson gained through the media.

"I just think he's an outstanding player and I'm glad to be able to play with him. All that other stuff, I don't really pay attention to it."

Blake also explained that Iverson's actions immediately following his arrival in Denver from Milwaukee got their relationship off to a great start.

"You know what? When I first got here he was the first guy to come say 'What's up?' to me and congratulate me on getting here. That says a lot about a person and I think he's a good guy."

Teammate Reggie Evans agreed with Blake and reserved passing any judgment until he, too, had the chance to get to know A.I. on and off of the hardwood.

"You can't ever judge a book by its cover or judge a person by what you hear. You can only go by when you meet him. I love A.I. I don't have anything bad to say. He's good for the whole team - not just me - he's good for the whole team."

"Trust me," Evans added with a genuine and convincing smile.

## Myth #2: Iverson the Ball Hog

Most skeptics of Denver's acquisition of Iverson point to the volume of shots the 11-year-veteran has taken throughout his career and insist one ball simply won't be enough for both he and Anthony. However, in his first few weeks in Denver the perception is that Iverson has been giving up the rock at a rate never before seen in his career just to fit in. In this case perception isn't necessarily reality.

"When I got double-doubles in Philadelphia or got the assists I got it wasn't a big deal," Iverson explained. "The only reason it's a big deal now is because it's a different situation. All eyes are on me and everybody expects me to come in and score like I had to score in Philadelphia, but the situation is totally different. The personnel is totally different. I think the level of talent that we have here - not taking anything away from Philadelphia - but the level of talent here is a lot better. I'm just playing basketball the way I was taught to play basketball and just taking whatever the defense gives me."



"You can't get an assist unless your teammate makes the shot," Iverson added with a chuckle.

As for Anthony, he's not buying into the notion of Iverson as a selfish player.

"I think all of that's overrated - him being a selfish player, him being a ball hog and all that. I think that's overrated. We're going to try our best to make it work. We both want to win, so that's why I'm pretty confident it's going to work."

So why all the talk that two high profile superstars can't co-exist?

"People need something to talk about," Anthony responded. "They need to sell newspapers. They need their ratings to go up on TV and on the radio shows."

Karl has also grown tired of hearing the Pepsi Center court isn't large enough for both Iverson and Anthony.

"It's not as hard as people are making it out to be. My honest belief as a coach is to stay out of his way, just make sure he feels good about being on the court, and not making it too complicated to where we think and freeze ourselves."

Nuggets Vice-President of Basketball Operations Mark Warkentien, one of the primary architects of the Iverson deal, knows while virtually no situation is perfect, the situation with Iverson and Anthony is a very good one.

"I'm a big military historian, and there's a great book called Patton on Leadership. The theme of the book is a good plan violently executed today beats tomorrow's perfect plan. Is this

a perfect plan? Probably not. Are there things we are going to have to work through? Certainly. But this is a good plan, and we'll just have to work our way through everything. When you have people with common goals you can usually find solutions."

Common goals are important, but let's examine a quick scenario. Imagine there are just a few ticks on the clock and the Nuggets have one chance to win a playoff series. Who takes the big shot?

"Just whoever's got it at that time," Anthony replied with a smile. "He can make a shot and I can make shot. It's going to be hard to try and double-team him and double-team me at the same time."

### Myth #3: Iverson the Coach Killer

Iverson played for six coaches during his tenure in Philadelphia. Even though four of those coaches came aboard during Iverson's final four seasons after having played six consecutive under Larry Brown, Iverson has nonetheless developed a reputation in some circles as "a coach killer." Karl has also had some run-ins with his star players in past stops, leading some people to speculate fire-works would develop rather quickly between Iverson and his new coach.

Well, if you are waiting for the big blow-up between the two you might find yourself waiting a long time.

"It's been great," Iverson said of his relationship with Karl. "He's kind of laid back. He honestly treats his guys like men. When you've got a guy who's laid back like that you've just got to be accountable for what you do. If a guy lets you be a man, you've got to act like a man and take care of your responsibilities and just be accountable for everything."

This is more than simply rhetoric, too. Iverson has already seen a quality in his new coach that instantly gained the respect of Denver's new superstar.

"I like the fact that he doesn't jump on guys during the game. I've never had respect for coaches that jumped on guys in front of 20,000 people, because when a coach jumps on a superstar player in front of 20,000 people they automatically think that player's wrong. And then that makes the fans jump on that guy. I just respect the fact that he'll jump on his guys at practice instead of showing them up in front of everybody."

Karl heard all the rumors about Iverson and even consulted with coaches who had trouble with him previously. For Karl, though, his interactions with Iverson have been nothing but positive.

"All I know is that I've got a player who wants to win a

championship," Karl explained. "Every time I've talked to him, every time I've seen him play with us, he's committed to making the team a champion. He's a great talent and he's blessed with tremendous skills. I don't think we're going to have any problem managing him to lead this team to get better, to get stronger and to be ready for playoff basketball."

As for Warkentien, he has seen Karl work his magic with other NBA personalities and believes this go round will be no different.



"They'll be great," Warkentien said of Iverson and Karl. "I tend to oversimplify, but you have two guys with a common goal. Both of them have been at this for a long time. George has got 800 wins, Allen has a plaque waiting for him at the Hall of Fame, and neither has a ring. I think they'll get along swimmingly. I have had the good fortune of working with George before and watched him coach Gary Payton in Seattle. I mean, you look at G.P. and you look at Allen — tough as nails, refuse-to-lose guys, tough single-minded personalities — I don't know why it would work out any differently between George and Allen in Denver."

Warkentien was also quick to add that having Karl as Denver's head coach was a consideration in the deal in the sense that having a coach of Karl's magnitude made such a

trade feasible for the Nuggets organization.

"I'll tell you this: If I was the GM in other places and other guys were the head coach, I might have suggested passing on this deal. But I've lived this with George, Gary and Shawn Kemp. Maybe I'm nuts, but it doesn't bother me a whole lot primarily because I see two guys who don't just want to win but they've got to win."

### Scared Stiff

Perhaps the best measure of a big trade is what the opposition thinks of it. The early returns are in and there seems to be one common theme: fear.

"Whew!" exclaimed Boston Celtic guard Sebastian Telfair when asked about having to defend a line-up which features Iverson, Anthony, and J.R. Smith. "That's going to be an extremely tough team. With A.I. and Melo and J.R. . . . that's going to be really tough!"

"I think it's a great fit, especially with their style," added Boston head coach Doc Rivers. "I've always felt Denver is the best home-court in the NBA because of the altitude. With

the speed that he brings to the game, I don't know if you could have had a better fit for him. This is going to be a difficult place to play. They are going to be able to throw up unbelievable numbers."

Will there be enough shots for everyone, though?

"I've long been a believer in the saying it's not about the X's and O's, it's about the Moe's and the Joe's," Rivers added. "The more you have the better. He's a talented player, and if you can add talent to your basketball team you always want it. Iverson adds more talent – great talent."

"I think they'll do fine," said Sixers head coach Mo Cheeks, who was Iverson's last coach in Philadelphia. "When you have Carmelo, J.R. Smith and Iverson, you have a lot of weapons. When you have a talent like Carmelo and a talent like Allen, I don't know how you guard them. I think with the way George Karl can coach they'll be fine."

Dallas head coach Avery Johnson agreed that Karl's coaching ability will be the key.

"I think the sky is the limit. You've got two really phenomenal offensive players who draw a lot of attention. You have a veteran coach that has coached one guy who is top fifty in Gary Payton and Shawn Kemp who in his heyday was pretty special. Coach Karl has seen it before. I think if they listen to him that will be their best opportunity to have success."

The coach of the reigning Western Conference champions believes the Nuggets will be a threat come playoff time.

"I don't think you can ever look past a team that has Allen Iverson on it, and I don't think you can look past a team that's coached by George Karl, who has been a legendary coach in our league."

## Moving Forward With Championship Aspirations

The Nuggets have their headlights pointed in one direction: forward. They heard all of the rumblings about Allen Iverson being trouble and offered him a fresh start in Denver, which he graciously accepted. The organization took responsibility for its role in December's fight at Madison Square Garden and has since moved on from that, as well.

The franchise is in the process of taking the trade for Iverson and the fight in New York — two events many people thought would be nothing but negative — and turning them into positives to help move the franchise forward. And despite popular sentiment, there were some positives that emerged in the

aftermath of the events in The Big Apple.

While many media pundits could be heard shouting from the highest rooftop that the brawl would ruin Denver's playoff chances, it has instead helped Denver's role players gain some much-needed experience while simultaneously reinvigorating some veterans.

"You had (Linas Kleiza) playing the three and four better than he ever had before," Karl pointed out. "You saw a professional positive energy with A.I. on the court. Eddie and Reggie continued to be warriors for us, and you have the young kids probably respecting the NBA a little more knowing that it's not as easy as they thought it was going to be."

The Nuggets are hoping the lessons learned by their role players during the suspensions will pay off come playoff time. The franchise believes the time to win in the playoffs is now.

"With the addition of Allen I think we've made this pretty clear. We want to win it," asserted Warkentien.

Karl, who coached the 1995-96 Seattle SuperSonics to an NBA Finals appearance, knows a good team when he sees one. Although the playoffs are still a couple of months away he likes the make-up of this Denver team.

"I like how our team fits. I think there's always an energy to a guy that wants to win a championship. The one thing that comes out in the time I've been around A.I. is when I talk to him that's all he wants. He wants to win and that is a contagious spirit, and then his nature of playing as hard as anyone in basketball over a long period of time is a contagious spirit, as well."

Warkentien, a man who has been involved in the business of the NBA for a decade and a half, knows that opportunities like the one the Nuggets have now with Iverson don't come along very often.

"I was talking with some of our guys when all of a sudden the opportunity was there and we were having our last meeting before making the trade. One of my offerings to the conversation was it might be another

ten years before you get a chance like this, and you may never get a chance for something of this magnitude. You may go your entire career without getting a chance like this. You know, I'm from Vegas and I voted that we roll the dice."

The dice are in the air as you read this sentence, and when they land, Iverson and the Nuggets hope that instead of "Talkin' bout practice" or the brawl at Madison Square Garden as the media have been doing to the point of nausea, they will instead be talking about a championship contender in The Mile High City.



## Making Magic In Orlando

By Steve Kyler

Building a winning tradition is not easy - the Orlando Magic have been trying to do that since losing Shaquille O'Neal to the Lakers way back in 1996.

Second-year Orlando General Manager Otis Smith inherited a Magic team two seasons ago with a ton of character and confidence issues. Over the past 20 months he has transformed a band of misfits into one of the deepest teams in the Eastern Conference.

"Nothing starts without talent," Smith explains about his philosophy on building this Magic team. "Then you have to have a good mixture between your young guys and your older guys. You have to have guys that understand their role. That probably out of anything, it's the biggest thing.

"If you look at the teams that are winning, it is team one through 12, or one through 15. They understand the job they are doing."

Smith's Magic shocked the NBA last season by stringing together an impressive stretch of wins down the stretch and just missing the playoffs by a couple of games.

During the off-season Smith resisted the urge to tinker with the roster, opting for continuity and development of his young stars like Dwight Howard and Jameer Nelson. He passed on questionable free agents and trades, choosing to go with more stable character players like Keith Bogans.

"I think character goes in as part of your role," admits Smith. "You have to have guys who, when they lay down at night, they care whether or not they won or they lost.

"You have to have guys who are gonna come in everyday and they are gonna work. They are gonna give you an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. No BS - guys need to care about what they are doing."

Smith was part of the Magic management team when things soured with Tracy McGrady in June of 2004. He was

part of the decision-making process to trade him, a huge gamble for a franchise losing its fans just three seasons ago.

Lacking a franchise player, Smith led the campaign to use Orlando's top pick in 2004 on an unproven high schooler named Dwight Howard over established college talent Emeka Okafor and helped sway the team towards current head coach Brian Hill.

"I think coaches are important," Smith says. "I think Brian is a good coach. He's a fundamentally sound coach. He's an 'attention to detail' coach.

"We needed that and he brought that to us. I'm not discounting what players bring, because you're not going to get anything done if you don't have enough of those big guys out there to go out and play."

The Orlando Magic are one of the deepest teams in the league with virtually two starting-caliber players at every position, most brought in by Smith in either trades or the draft.

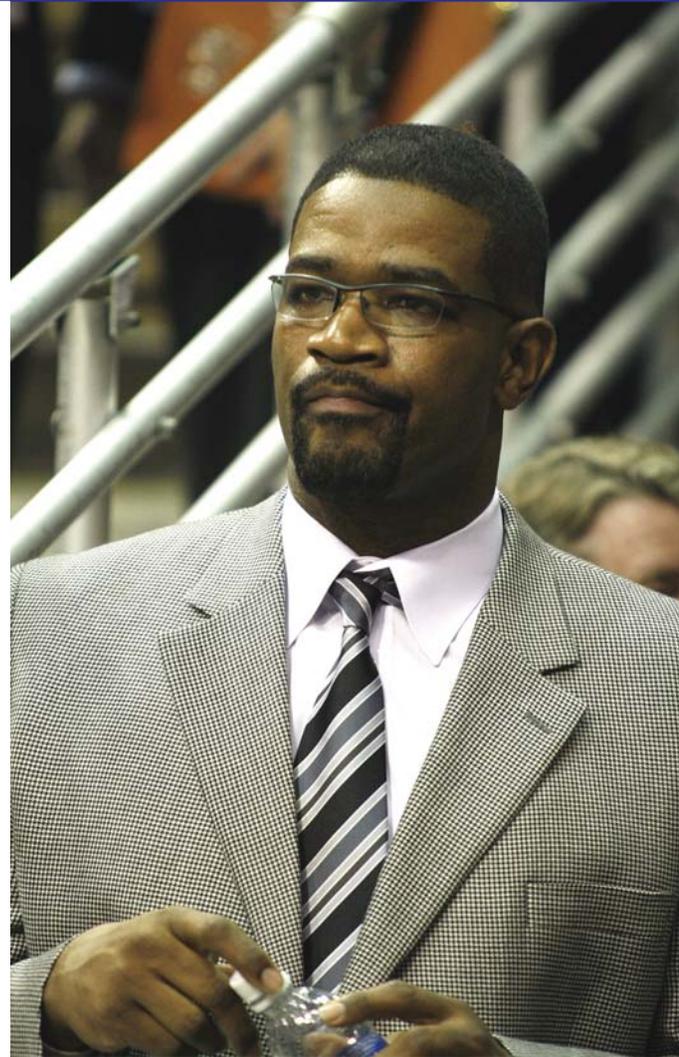
"I think depth is important," explains Smith. "Depth is a double-edged sword; sometimes you can have too many guys that need to play.

"You look at the 'Phoenixes' of the world which play eight, maybe nine guys in their rotation. I think you have to have enough talent 1 through 15. Everybody has to have a role, and understand in 82 games there are peaks and valleys. You have to be ready to go at all times."

Smith's Magic squad has an unusual combination of youth and size, with some of the best young big men in the East in Dwight Howard and Darko Milicic.

"I think this 'small ball' thing is kind of the fashion of the day," explains Smith. "It's what we're doing today; it's not new. It's something we did a couple of years back and it comes and it goes.

"It's proven that what wins over the long haul is having a solid big guy, somebody



you can throw into and score. The game hasn't changed; the rules are still the same. You score buckets, you win basketball games. The closer you are to the basket, the easier the buckets you score; the easier it is for your team to win basketball games. Everybody is trying to go to this small ball and we can try to adjust like most teams do, but I think we have a pretty good, solid big man corps that can make any small team - you know Darko has the ability to guard small ball - we just have to make them adjust to us, too."

Adjusting to the Orlando Magic has been pretty easy for Otis Smith, and rebuilding the team into a power in the East seems to be working out pretty nicely, as well. The Magic are poised to be a serious threat when the league goes back to the Big Man - and they'll look to prove that in the playoffs this year.

### “Agent Zero” the Hero

By Kealin Culbreath



Gilbert Arenas has finally arrived. We have witnessed his transformation from obscure point guard to full blown superstar capable of leading his team to an NBA title. Gilbert (a.k.a. “Agent Zero”) is averaging career-highs in points, rebounds, assists, and steals. Moreover, he is leading the Washington Wizards to a top seed in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

The question remains: Is Arenas worthy of being the NBA’s Most Valuable Player? With all of the national exposure he receives for his incredible scoring outbursts and plethora of game-winning shots, fans, sportswriters and teammates all agree he is a strong candidate.

“He is a beast,” says teammate Jarvis Hayes. “With the way that he’s been

playing, he has to be the favorite to win MVP. The way he performs night after night, I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

It can be taken a step further. Based on the most widely-accepted criteria for MVP considerations - excellent individual numbers, impressive leadership skills, and overall importance to the team - Arenas is worthy of *heavy* consideration for the league’s most coveted individual award.

#### Individual Accolades

There is no denying that Arenas ranks as one of the NBA’s elite based on his individual numbers. A fantasy league first-rounder, he’s among the league leaders in points, assists, steals, three-pointers, and free throws. He’s been named Player of the Week on three occasions and for his outstanding efforts in the month of December he was named Eastern Conference Player of the Month.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll continue to say it,” exclaims veteran guard Antonio Daniels. “I’ve played with some future Hall-of-Famers in my career and Gilbert is the third-best player among them. When it’s time to take over the game, he does. Gilbert is definitely an MVP candidate.” Daniels wouldn’t elaborate, but stars he has played with in his career include Tim Duncan, David Robinson, and Ray Allen.

#### Leadership Characteristics

Although not a prerequisite, the MVP will be the leader and focal point of a play-off-bound team. In this regard, Arenas has done a phenomenal job in leading his squad back to the promised land. Washington is in the thick of the Eastern Conference playoff race again, thanks largely to Arenas.

“I’ve known Gilbert since he’s been in the league and he’s been performing beyond what I’ve seen Gilbert perform at; beyond what I’ve seen some of the all-time greats perform at,” says Antawn Jamison, who was also a teammate at Golden State. “I mean, I’ve seen Kobe.

I’ve seen the Mitch Richmonds of the league. I played against Jordan. This is up there. As long as he’s performing the way he’s performing and we’re winning, it’s not too far-fetched to be thinking MVP candidate this season. We’re competing for one of the best records in the Eastern Conference and he’s the reason for it.”

#### Importance to the Team

Over the last few years the Wizards have been known for their explosive offense and for the “Big Three” of Arenas, Jamison and Caron Butler. Although they combine for 70 points per game, Gilbert is the engine that makes the Wizards run.

“MVP. That’s all I have to say,” proclaims Butler. “I’ve seen a lot of great things. I saw Dwyane [Wade] come into his own. I played with Kobe [Bryant], and you can see how great he was. But with this team’s success and with him playing the way he is, MVP. He’s making everyone better - myself, everyone. So many guys are benefiting from what he’s doing. I have the confidence in him that whenever we’re down, he will deliver.”

Quite frankly, without Arenas, the Wizards would be a lottery team. As of this writing the Wizards have lost only twice when he scored at least 30 points and have won only five times when he did not. He is their only true superstar, the only one who can get his own shot, but also regularly create scoring opportunities for others.

“Gil is our leader,” says Head Coach Eddie Jordan. “It’s clear that he means so much to us the way he approaches the games, his behavior, his demeanor. Everybody follows his lead.”

For those of you who haven’t had the pleasure of watching “Agent Zero” play this season, do yourselves a favor and watch him closely. Notice his “swag is phenomenal” and he is usually the best player on the court. Notice Arenas thrives in adversity and elevates his game when his team needs him the most. Notice how opposing defenses are baffled about how to guard him. Notice how those are all characteristics of an MVP.

### The New "Air" to the Empire

By Jessica Camerato

He didn't plan on doing it. In fact, he hadn't thought much about it. It just kind of...happened. But once he started, he couldn't stop.

Gerald Green began dunking on a whim. Just another day of ball with his friends turned into the beginning of a high-flying fascination.

"It was a fluke," Green said. "I was playing in the park when the game was over and everybody was just messing around and I was dunking...that's how it all came along."

A spontaneous slam dunk in a Houston park six years ago was just the beginning of Gerald Green's claim to fame. But the lanky 6'8" forward didn't realize what he had accomplished.

"It was just a regular one-handed dunk," he said. "[Then] everybody was like, 'You know that's a 10'2" goal, right?'"

This did not faze the high school sophomore.

"I was just like, 'Oh I didn't know I could dunk, okay,'" Green, now 21, recalled.

But his friends knew they had witnessed something special.

"They said, 'I bet you could get real high on the other goal,'" said Green.

Green continued to get high above the rim. He was named to the McDonald's All-American Team and won the Slam Dunk trophy.

"My coaches used to always test me to see what kind of dunks I could do," Green said. "I did a lot of crazy stuff in high school. All the dunks I've done in the NBA wouldn't even be close to any of the dunks I did in high school."

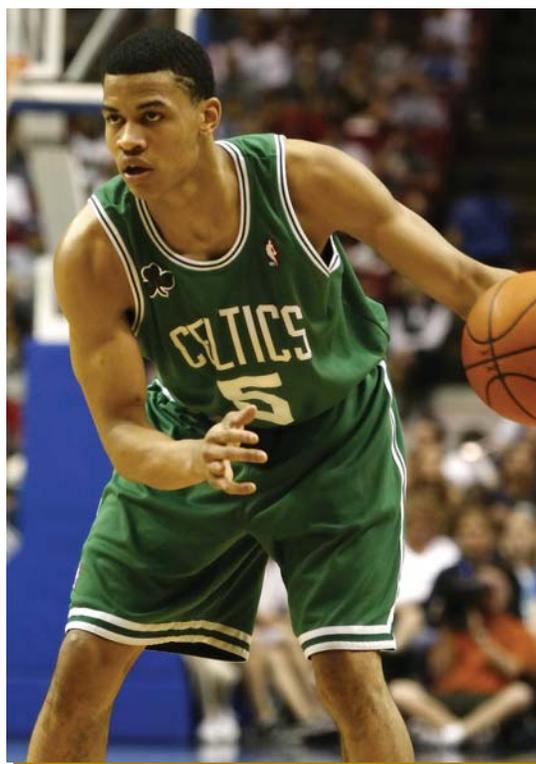
By his senior year, Green had caught the attention of NBA scouts. Although he had already committed to Oklahoma State University, Green hired an agent

and entered the NBA draft.

"It was a hard decision," he said. "I was really strong on going to college, but I prayed on it and it was just a dream I wanted to fulfill."

On Draft Night 2005, Green saw his dream slip further and further away. Seventeen names were called before the Boston Celtics selected him with the 18th overall pick.

"I was sitting there and everybody was getting called up except me. It was kind



of like a burning desire. I wanted to show people that everybody made a mistake," Green said.

Regardless of when Green was picked, he was just happy to be a member of the Boston Celtics.

"I was very excited I got drafted, most definitely," he said. "But then when I heard Boston call me, I was just thrilled 'cause this is just a great organization to play with. I knew the history about it so I was just like, 'Yes!'"

The Celtics, too, were excited after seeing the rookie's performance at the 2005 Vegas Summer League. His slam over two L.A. Clippers established him

as one of the NBA's up-and-coming dunkers. Green worked on his game in the NBDL and when he was called up to Boston last February, his first two points were - appropriately enough - a dunk.

"It was a fast break and they threw it ahead," he said. "I just caught it and I went up. I was like, 'Oh, I better make this' because I was going to get in trouble if I wouldn't have made it."

Now in his second season with the Celtics, Green has made an immediate impact on his teammates.

"He can jump real high, it's crazy," said Al Jefferson, Green's teammate of two years. "He's a great guy, a high energy player, always ready to learn stuff and make his game better. I think he's gonna be one of the guys like Vince Carter was."

Jefferson isn't the only teammate drawing comparisons between Green and other NBA All-Stars.

"I think he's going to be a superstar, like one of those Tracy McGrady, Kobe Bryant kind of players," said Sebastian Telfair. "He's a lot more talented than what he knows right now."

Green will display his young talent at the 2007 Slam Dunk Contest during All-Star Weekend.

"It'd mean a lot [to win]," said Green. "It'd mean I've accomplished something a lot of the great players won — Michael Jordan, Dominique Wilkins, Vince Carter...that would be a dream to win it."

Coach Doc Rivers hopes that dream comes true.

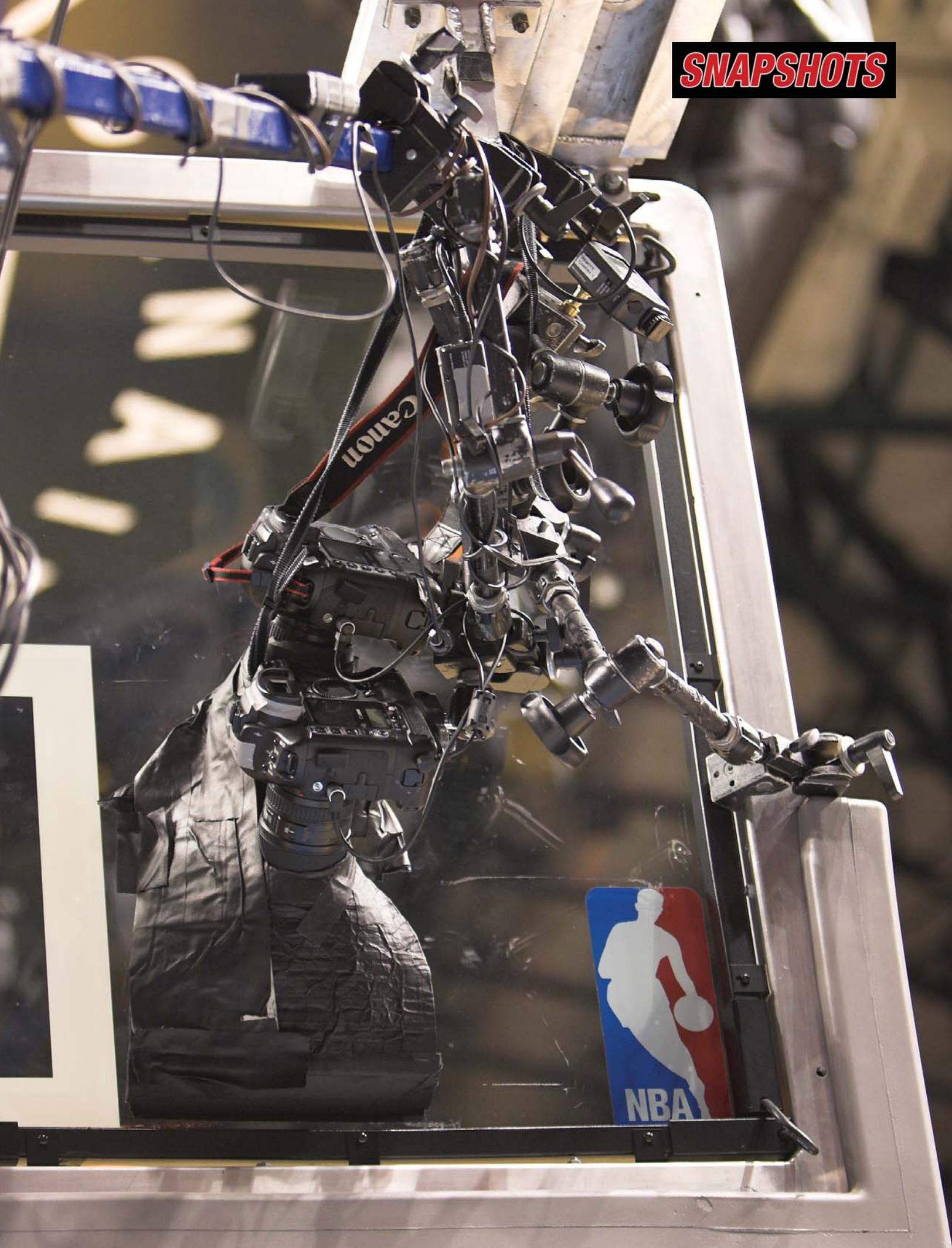
"He clearly has earned that right to be in it," said Rivers. "He's just an incredible leaper. The thing I've been most impressed with his jumping is how quick he gets up and down ... that's stuff Dominique used to do. There are very few players that can do that."

Very few players can soar as effortlessly as Green can, even when he doesn't plan on doing it.

"I just go out there and do it," Green said. "I guess it's just second nature."

As everyone knows, there's no stopping a force of nature.

**SNAPSHOTS**





## These are the Los Angeles Lakers.

It's been two and a half seasons since Shaquille O'Neal was shipped off to the Miami Heat. Back when the Lakers were winning three titles in four NBA Finals appearances the team was defined by the tumultuous relationship between Bryant and O'Neal.

Nowadays the Laker locker room is a different animal.

Gone are the salty veterans, the tension and thus far the titles.

These Lakers are one of the younger teams in the league, with Bryant (the oldest rotation player) just 28. Shaquille O'Neal's replacement is a 19-year old kid named Andrew Bynum ... holding the distinction as youngest player in the entire NBA.

Despite their age, the Lakers have managed to win consistently throughout the early months of the 2006-07 season. They're one of the league's best passing, shooting and scoring teams despite having to overcome injuries to Lamar Odom, Kwame Brown and Chris Mihm.

How have the Lakers advanced so quickly when just two

seasons ago they were a frustrated lottery team?

Along with the return of Coach Phil Jackson, the maturity of Kobe Bryant as leader has been instrumental in restoring respectability to one of the NBA's legendary franchises.

Ronny Turiaf remembers the disagreement he and Vujacic had back in Charlotte. "Me and Sasha, we love each other and we were just out there playing hard. We were trying to get our points across, but in the heat of the moment it didn't come out as being positive. Kobe came over and just slapped us in the head."

Bryant brought both players to the sideline and led a heated discussion.

"He was just trying to be the in-between guy as far as making sure we were on the same page," continues Turiaf. "'Okay, you two need to calm down. Here's how it's supposed to be done. What do you see out there?' I told him my point. He asked Sasha, 'What do you see out there?'"

This is a new Bryant - one the Lakers didn't need early in the decade. O'Neal was the vocal leader. The team had old pros keeping each other in line. Bryant led with his play, but

# Embracing Leadership

## Kobe Bryant and His Young Teammates Learning Trust

By Eric Pincus

Somewhere in the second quarter of what would ultimately be a triple-overtime loss to the Charlotte Bobcats the Los Angeles Lakers found themselves in disarray. After a defensive lapse that led to a Matt Carroll three-point play, Laker Ronny Turiaf turned to teammate Sasha Vujacic in anger. As the two exchanged harsh words, team captain Kobe Bryant stepped between them. He put his arm around Turiaf, grabbed Vujacic by the scruff of the neck and walked them back to the bench for a time out.

he was still the upstart little brother.

"When he first got here he was a 17 or 18 year old and the team had a lot of veterans, so he wasn't asked to be as much of a leader," says long-time Laker commentator Stu Lantz. "When you're a great player you can do things on the floor and lead that way. It's different when you are asked to vocally be the leader. That's where he is now and he's done a remarkable job."

Surrounded by young players still finding their way in the NBA, Bryant has had to mature right along with them.

"Back then the team was so good. He used to go out on the court and lead by his talent alone," says Laker forward Luke Walton. "Now we're a young team; a team that's on the way up. He's more involved in the locker room, on the court and in practice – teaching like another coach as opposed to just going out there and showing how good he is."

With so many years inside the triangle offense, Bryant knows the system better than any other Laker.

"He pulls people aside and gives tips; lets people know different ways to play within the triangle. He knows the sys-

tem so well he could be a coach," continues Walton. "He'll tell you, 'They're overplaying me here so next time step on the back door and look for me cutting.' Little things like that."

Along with his improved off-court leadership, Bryant has taken real steps to sublimate his game. Instead of looking to light up the scoreboard from the opening tip, he aggressively looks to get his teammates involved.

"We have to space the floor and move the ball. When we do that we start to get easy opportunities, which then gets everyone in the flow," says Bryant. "If I start [dominating the scoring] in the first quarter, you'll see doubles coming and zones shifting."

When his cast members contribute offensively, Bryant is able to be both decoy and playmaker early. This enables him to close out games with his scoring, unencumbered by multiple defenders.

The result is a team united and committed to a system they know works.

"With all the injuries, we've had to work together to keep the record we have. We're comfortable in what we're do-



“I think its just taken me time to develop as a leader and to understand how to get the most out of my teammates.”

*Kobe Bryant*

ing,” says Walton. “We have great chemistry on the team and we trust each other. That’s the only way we can have a record like we do with all the injuries that we’ve had.”

With Bryant sharing the ball, Walton is having a breakout season. He’s gone from being a bench player to a double-digit scorer and starter for a playoff-caliber team. Walton has remained among the league leaders in field goal and three-point percentage all year. Alongside Bryant and Odom, Walton provides the team with crucial play-making that makes the Laker offense very difficult to stop.

When Walton is playing well, it’s a sign the team is executing the triangle effectively. While Bryant has made a concerted effort to play team ball, there are still games when he breaks from the system.

“We try to do our thing but some nights when he gets going ... just give him the ball and get out of the way,” says Walton. “No matter what

we do in the offense, when he’s on he’s going to score 50-70% of the time ... no matter what the defense is doing.”

But is it in the best interest of the team - to rely on one man to do so much?

“We roll with it. We want to keep the triangle going because eventually they’re going to start throwing two to three guys at him. While he’s running hot we just keep looking for him,” says Walton. “It’s a fine line. I think we’re a better team when we’re passing and running the triangle; then down the stretch he makes his plays.”

Sometimes the Lakers make it work to perfection. Other times Bryant’s teammates defer to a fault.

“That is what’s tough because as a player you haven’t been in the flow, as opposed to having the ball and making plays,” says Walton. “As a young team, we’re still growing. You fail and then you learn from failing.”

That’s been the battle for Bryant. When opposing teams disrupt the system, often times he’ll try to single-handedly shoot the Lakers back into the game.

“Scoring is like breathing to him. He can pretty much score at will,” says Brian Cook. “The thing with him is that sometimes he tries to do too much, which is both a good thing and a bad thing. He has gotten better each and every year at trusting his teammates.”

When the playoffs arrived last season, LA nearly stunned the Phoenix Suns by taking a 3-1 lead in the first-round series. The Lakers would ultimately lose in seven, but the world saw a different Kobe Bryant. Though he was criticized for a quiet second half in the final game, he was committed to Jackson’s game plan requiring teamwork to overtake the Suns. Ultimately, the Lakers weren’t mature enough to pull it off.

While recently broadcasting play-by-play on TNT during the Lakers’ overtime victory over the Sacramento Kings, commentator Charles Barkley credited the Phoenix series as the moment Bryant realized he could trust and rely on his teammates.

Bryant feels it came earlier. “I think it’s just taken me time to develop as a leader and to understand how to get the most out of my teammates. The Phoenix series, I think, was the start from the public’s standpoint.”

From Bryant’s perspective, he carried the load offensively last season until the team learned the system. The triangle relies on players reading defenders and making instant, reflexive decisions. Most players are accustomed to a traditional offense run by a point guard and, to a certain extent, controlled by the coach. It took

nearly the entire year for the team to become comfortable as a unit.

"We knew all season long that we wanted to get to that point," acknowledges Bryant. "We had to keep the ship floating. To do that I had to put points on the board until everybody got comfortable in the system. Once that happened I could step back."

Lamar Odom is another Laker who had been having a career season before a knee injury put him on the sidelines. He was the key component the Lakers received in return for O'Neal from the Heat, but Odom seemed to struggle at first playing alongside Bryant. With the return of Coach Jackson, Odom and Bryant began to mesh . . . most notably in the second half of the 2005-6 season. The Lakers turned to Odom as their go-to scorer in the playoff series against the Suns.

"I think it took [Bryant] some time to get used to everybody's personalities as far as what they bring to the table," says Odom. "I think he's grown tremendously. He knows how to lead by example, by his words, by his presence and his energy."

Integrating a second star is no easy challenge for Bryant. It's one thing to score 81 points against the Toronto Raptors; Bryant knows he can't win a playoff series by himself.

"It's like any other relationships you've ever been in. They bloom and blossom as you spend time together," says Odom. "Right now it's at its peak. It's getting better as I come into my own. Of course, when you're playing with a player like Kobe Bryant, if you take your game to its pinnacle . . . anything is possible. That's why I think we've gotten off to such a great start this year."

First-year Laker Maurice Evans offers a fresh perspective.

"Kobe has a somewhat different style of leadership than that of Chauncey [Billups], Kevin [Garnett], Mike Bibby and guys I've played with," says Evans. "I think he leads a little bit more with his play than vocally."

The offense hasn't been easy for Evans to adapt to, but he's proven to be a reliable contributor off the bench.

"I understand the triangle enough now so when it's my turn, I try to roll with it. The nights when it's not, I try to be consistent defensively with things that help the team," says Evans. "I like to score, but I think that people who don't really understand the game don't realize that there's more to it than that. They say, 'Those guys don't help. They're not scoring. [Bryant] doesn't have anyone to pass to.'"

While Bryant's leadership has needed time to

develop with his more mature teammates, the younger Lakers eagerly look to him for mentorship.

"He's taught me a lot of things like how to prepare for a game; how to take my time when I get the ball on the block," says Andrew Bynum. "Nothing that he ever does is in a rush and he's trying to rub that off on me a bit. One big thing he taught me about was watching tape and studying the game."

Rookie point guard Jordan Farmar says he enjoys the education he gets playing alongside Bryant, "He's the best player in the league and he works the hardest day in and day out. He really puts in the dedication and time."



Turiaf, who went through a harrowing open-heart surgery last year only to emerge as a valuable bench player some 16 months later, often turns to Bryant for support.

"He's been there for me. He's been talking to me and coaching me and trying to make me work harder," says Turiaf. "By just seeming so confident he's given me confidence in my abilities to produce on the basketball court."

Turiaf's passion has inspired the team, but Bryant needed

to temper it on the Charlotte sideline.

"A lot of time you find with young players, when a lack of execution breaks you down defensively, they want to talk about what went wrong," remembers Bryant. "You've gotta talk it out, but it's not going to do anything to harp on it or point the finger. You'll find that sort of thing with young players, but I think they've grown from that experience."

With 10 years of experience in the league Bryant has much to offer in that department, especially to his nine teammates with five years or fewer. Talent, trust and teamwork all go hand-in-hand, but inexperience can be a killer.

Coach Phil Jackson recognizes the change in Bryant.

"He does more stroking now. He gives his players more credit. He gives them more support - encourages them more if they're having a tough time," says Jackson. "Before I think he was more demonstrative."

It's difficult to tell just how far the Lakers have progressed. They've clearly grown as a team this season, but will that translate into playoff success?

"We didn't really come into the season with any type of expectations whatsoever. We really just wanted to play together; just moving the ball and executing our offense and defense," says Bryant. "We'll let the chips fall where they may. We don't have any expectations as far as being one of the better teams. We just feel like if we do what we do - we'll be there when it counts."

Evans recognizes the quandary Bryant faces as he tries to lead the Lakers to a post-season run.

"He makes everyone on the court better. He demands so much attention so by default we find ourselves getting wide open shots," says Evans. "But there are challenges when you're playing with one of the most dominant scorers in the game. That guy is so talented and capable of scoring that sometimes he might press the issue. Maybe if he trusts us a little bit more, it might make things a little easier for everyone."

As much of a balancing act as it may be, the Lakers need to dramatically improve as a team defensively if they hope to challenge for an NBA title.



To that end, Bryant is confident, "It all comes together simultaneously. It's one cohesive effort. A lot of nights when you play well offensively, you play well defensively. They go hand-in-hand."

Bryant has progressed from his days as Robin to Shaquille O'Neal's Batman. He's had to advance beyond just being a great basketball player to being a mentor and true captain.

Turiaf sees Bryant maturing on both fronts.

"Kobe is a leader on the basketball court through action. He shows us that regardless of what happens, we always have a chance to win," says Turiaf. "He's also a vocal leader because he tries to have some type of a positive outlook and positive thinking on the game."

Even in the moments when the triangle collapses and the Lakers drop

winnable games, the team is developing ahead of schedule. Without harping on his flaws, Evans identifies Bryant's true strength.

"He's a great leader. His basketball skills speak volumes about his talent level; his willingness to carry and shoulder an entire team. He won't allow himself to face defeat. You're out there on the floor with someone who is so determined you feel like you're almost letting him down when you don't contribute or play with the same energy."

"I'm not saying you don't want to let him down, specifically. When you see somebody with that passion you want to match that passion. You don't want to let yourself down."

Bryant's work ethic may be undeniable, but you can't practice leadership skills alone in a gym.

"No, you have to go off of gut instincts and feelings and just be who you are," says Bryant. "I feel that all the years of playing in the league and observing under Phil has primed me for this role."

With a reputation for and history of dominating the basketball, Bryant has embraced the team concept.

He's grown from the kid to the mentor.

"It's about being a big brother just giving them encouragement but also getting on top of them sometimes," says Kobe reflectively.

"It's about being a family."

The Laker family appears to be in excellent hands.

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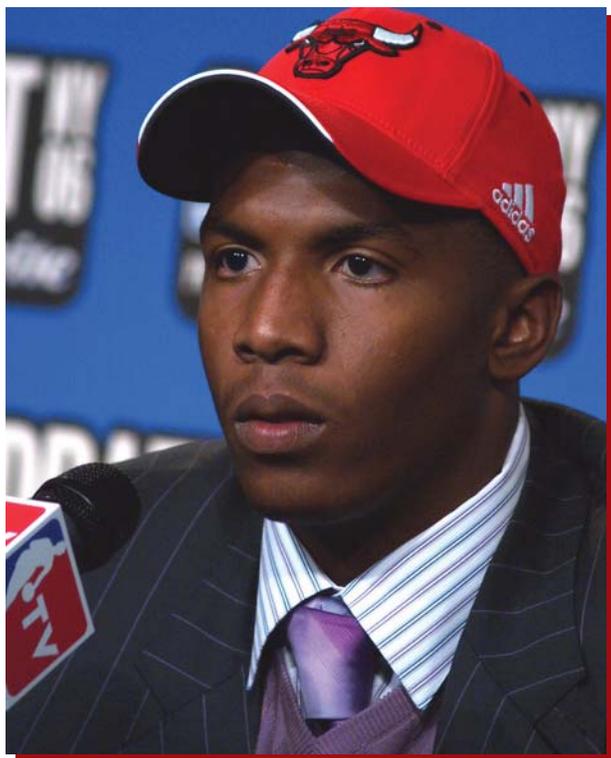
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### An Extraordinary Rookie

By Joel Brigham

The primary concerns of most ordinary twenty-year olds include things like paying apartment rent on time, getting a term paper completed by the end of the semester, and deciding what to wear to the big toga party on Saturday night. For Chicago Bulls rookie Tyrus Thomas, however, the life of this twenty-year old is much different and definitely more public.



Even before the 2006 draft it was no secret Bulls General Manager John Paxson wanted to see Thomas' length and athleticism in Chicago red-and-black. For the highly touted young prospect, the feeling was mutual.

"It feels good to put on a Bulls uniform and try to uphold the legacy of the Bulls' tradition. They're treating me really well. Everybody wants to see everybody get better, so it's a good environment to be in."

One of the perks of playing in Chicago means having the ability to call up Bulls' legend Scottie Pippen for help and advice.

The six-time world champion was happy to oblige, working with Thomas after team practices for most of the season.

"[Pippen] is helping me out with everything," Thomas offers, barely able to hold back his excitement. "The game, life outside of basketball as well. He's just a good guy who was successful in the league, and I'm taking advantage of the opportunity just to talk with him and work with him.

It's ironic; people think I say it just to be politically correct, but I always wanted to be like Scottie Pippen," Thomas admits as he reminisces about childhood NBA fantasies. "I was always a small guy doing his best on the team and every team had that Michael Jordan. I was like, 'Okay, I'll just be Scottie' - which wasn't a bad player to be."

Of course the NBA is much different than backyard ball. The biggest distinction, according to Thomas? "Basketball is my job now... It's another level, just faster, quicker. This is what guys do to pay the bills, so it's going to be more aggressive."

It certainly can be a tooth-and-nail business and many rookies have a hard time adapting to other aspects of the pro game, like dealing with money and fame. LSU received much press for its NCAA tournament run last year, so being recognized in public isn't anything new for Thomas.

As far as money is concerned, the Bulls' veterans keep a pretty close eye on their rookie.

"I'm not caught up in the glamour, and those guys (P.J. Brown and Ben Wallace) are probably as laid back as you're going to find... They help me with anything I ask—life, bas-

ketball, money. You know, anything."

After some games, Thomas crashes at the homes of Wallace or Brown - usually on the couch - just because the vets want him to feel as comfortable as possible in his new city.

However nurturing the older guys might be at times, there's still plenty of room for some good, old-fashioned ribbing.

"My veterans are cool, man... they don't really thrive on that. Well, [I do have to drive Ben Wallace] to the airport, but that's a one-of-a-kind experience. You don't want to miss that one for the world."

Wallace was coy about the details of these excursions, but both he and Brown claim Thomas has it easier than they once did. "Believe me," Brown said, "I don't drive him as much as I got drove when I was a rookie. Man, I got murdered."

Wallace agreed. "Yeah, I can co-sign that... We had it a lot tougher." Yet it seems like the specifics of these initiation rites are secrets among the players. Wallace can only say: "If I don't feel like driving to the airport... he's gotta come pick me up!"

With this Thomas smiles and you can start to see the mischievousness bubble up in his eyes. Thomas is known as something of a clown in the locker room, and in the comedy of the moment he throws a playful elbow in the direction of teammate and friend Michael Sweetney while sharing what he believes is the most difficult part of being an NBA rookie.

"I gotta clean Mike's leopard-printed thong. I've got to wash it all the time, after every practice."

Everybody in the area cuts up with laughter, making it absolutely clear that Thomas has found himself an ideal situation. Still, when it comes down to it, Thomas can attribute only one thing to his having made it to the pros: "It's just hard work, man. Hard work pays off."

While ordinary twenty-somethings gear up for their sophomore years of college, Tyrus Thomas is swatting away shots and dunking on childhood idols. But then again, Tyrus Thomas is far from an ordinary twenty-year old.

### Passing Test of Life in Larry Legend's Shadow

By Wendell Maxey, Jr.

Everyday is full of tests for Adam Morrison.

It's been a way of life for the Charlotte Bobcats' unique rookie forward since he was fourteen years old. That's when Morrison was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, a disease in which the body does not produce insulin. Eight years later and in the NBA, Morrison continues to monitor and test his blood sugar level even on the sidelines during games.

"Adam does a good job of taking care of himself," Bobcats head coach Ernie Bickerstaff said of the third overall pick in the 2006 NBA Draft.

As part of his routine, Morrison eats steak and potatoes two-and-a-half hours before tip off to preserve the energy he needs at game time.

"Usually when we have our film he comes in with his steak because that's what time he eats," says Bickerstaff. "The steaks he eats, we all go home and ask our wives to prepare them. They smell damn good. We go home and ask for steak and potatoes."

Morrison tests his blood sugar level between three and four times a day and knows it is a far greater obstacle than the one he faces every time he steps out on the court.

"There are kids doing the same thing I'm doing on a lower level, in college, and high school and that is an inspiration. You have to look at the big picture."

After three years at Gonzaga University - he finished as the school's third all-time leading scorer - Morrison arrived in Charlotte hand-picked by Michael Jordan, the Bobcats' Managing Member of Basketball Operations. Even Jordan wasn't distracted by the 6'8" introvert-turned-cultural icon's long hair or throwback mustache; he simply loved the way Morrison shot the ball and played with intensity. Those traits lead many to compare Morrison to Boston Celtics' great Larry Bird.

"It's cool to be compared in that light," Morrison says of the Bird comparisons, as unfair as they may be. "People have

to realize what he did on the court: MVP's, NBA Championships. The biggest comparison is basically because I'm white and that's what happens. It's not a knock on anything or anybody but if you think of all the great white players that have come in the last few years everyone says Larry Bird. That's the first thing they say."

Morrison admits he tries to emulate Bird, but is also enamored with all the competition in the league. He especially admires a certain member of the Dallas Mavericks, who also once drew comparisons to "Larry Legend."

"I'm a fan of Dirk Nowitzki and would like to play like him but it's pretty tough," admits Morrison. "That's why it's fun being an NBA player. You are playing the best of the best with guys you looked up to in high school and college and now I get the chance to play against them."

In his first NBA game Morrison scored 14 points against the Indiana Pacers. So far that's been a microcosm of his rookie year, as he ranks among the top rookies in scoring, averaging around 14 points per game for the Bobcats.

"He's navigating the mountain," says Bickerstaff. "He'll be real good because of his courage. He's got good courage and wants you to know that he belongs and that he's a tough kid."

Charlotte point guard Brevin Knight, a nine-year veteran, believes Morrison fits nicely on a Bobcat team bound tightly with veteran leadership and young athleticism.

"He's a fiery guy who wants to win and that is always good to have," said Knight. "He stays behind the rest of the guys that have been there and done it before, which is what a rookie should do, but in no way do we silence him. He definitely speaks his mind at times when we need it."

While Morrison is adjusting to teammates and the up-tempo NBA game, some national analysts have highlighted his defensive shortcomings, calling

Morrison "the absolute worst defender." Others offer a less harsh critique.

"He's not as bad as everyone says," admits one NBA scout. "He does have trouble reading defenses and looks for his shot too much, but he is aggressive and will take on the challenge of being a two-way player."



Facing tests is nothing new for Adam Morrison, who has seen his share living with diabetes and accepting the challenge of being the latest NBA rookie to follow the lead of Larry Bird. Bird he may not be, but Morrison does possess a similar competitiveness and intensity worthy of legend, regardless of the critics nitpicking his game. Now Morrison looks to do something Bird accomplished in 1979: being named Rookie of the Year. It's just another test Morrison is ready to pass.

## From All-Star to Superstar

By Lawrence Buirse

"We have a young player who is very good and that is Pau Gasol, but he is not a superstar at this time. He is an All-Star player, but there is a great difference."

Those comments come from none other than "The Logo" himself: Memphis Grizzlies President of Basketball Operations Jerry West. Known for being candid, West simplified his stance on the player he once labeled "the cornerstone of the franchise" by expressing his desire for him to become a superstar. Gasol wants to accomplish that through his actions - not his words.

ten feet away and in. As a result, Gasol established the reputation for being a soft player. The early scouting report was simple: become physical with Pau and he becomes less of a factor.

"I may not be the most physical player, that's not my nature," admitted Pau. "But right now, in the position I am, my team lacks a big interior presence so me playing physical becomes a big thing."

During the 2005-06 season Gasol became a difference-maker, and that's what has propelled him from being just another talented NBA player to a star.

taking games over down the stretch. I've never really seen that in him his first couple of years."

Gasol is proud of his accomplishments to this point, but has much higher expectations for himself.

"I ask a lot from myself and I try to aim as high as possible," said Gasol. "If you settle for what you have done, you tend to be comfortable with it and you get worse."

Consistency defines an All-Star and that trait will ultimately make the difference in whether Gasol ever reaches the level of NBA superstar. He realizes it's a steep hill to climb, just as it has been to lead the Grizzlies to playoff success.

"I want to become one of the top twenty players in the league on a consistent basis and be able to do that along with the team's success," Gasol stated. "That is another challenge that you have to take every year, if you want to be amongst those kinds of players."

From winning the FIBA World Championships and capturing MVP honors to earning his first NBA All-Star bid, Pau is gradually becoming worthy of the title "franchise player." Still, at age 26 he has not reached his full potential. It's well within reason to believe his progression will not only lead to his becoming a perennial All-Star, but also an NBA superstar.

"I already have been chosen to be an NBA All-Star, and winning the World Championship of Basketball and being voted the MVP, which I rate very, very high," said Gasol. "Winning an NBA title would be right at the top of my list because I don't have it. It's something that's really hard to get. We fight all year long to try to get it. It's something that every team in the league tries to get. It's definitely my goal. One day I hope to be in a situation where I can fight for it."

From hope stems determination and there's no question Gasol has the work ethic to become a superstar in the NBA.

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“He is not a superstar at this time. He is an All-Star player, but there is a great difference.”

*Jerry West*

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"I don't want anyone to have any doubts about me - any questions like, 'He's good, but he's not one of the top forwards or players in the league,'" said Gasol. "I want to keep playing at the kind of level where I'll get respect from everybody."

Gasol has been working to gain respect from the moment he entered the league as the third overall pick in the NBA Draft. At 7-0 and 227 pounds, he hardly fit the NBA's definition of a big man - and he knew it.

"I played small forward for the most part when I was growing up," Gasol explains. "I never had to be an inside presence. I was very skinny and never had to do that."

The international game is built on finesse - big men being as skilled as guards. In the NBA, tradition still demands seven-footers play mostly from

Former teammate and close friend Shane Battier once described Pau as being "probably the league's best-kept secret." His skill level and feel for the game has even drawn comparison to Western Conference nemesis Tim Duncan.

"We do things very similarly," Duncan admitted. "We're out there to score, of course, but we're also out there to draw double-teams and make our teammates better."

Like Duncan, Gasol's high skill level makes it appear he is playing with minimum effort. In the eyes of many who have followed Pau's progression assertiveness may still be an issue. But last season he made huge strides in being able to take over a game.

"That may have been his reputation in the past, but he's not that way anymore," Dallas' Dirk Nowitzki says. "I think he's

**SNAPSHOTS**



# The Meaning of All-Star

## An All-Inclusive Look at Basketball's Biggest Spectacle

By Bill Ingram

The All-Star game means a lot of things to a lot of people. It's a showcase for players who have distinguished themselves amongst the fans and coaches who vote them in. It's a chance for players to show they belong among the league's elite. It gives players a feeling of accomplishment and legitimacy. All-Star, though, goes beyond the glitz and glamour of the spectacle the weekend has become. Sure, there's plenty of bling-bling and hype surrounding the NBA's version of The Oscars, but the impact of the All-Star game is deep-seeded and far reaching.

Through the eyes of general managers, coaches, players, sponsors, owners - the entire spectrum of the NBA world - the essence of All-Star weekend can be found.

"I don't enter the season saying I want to be an All-Star," admits Dallas Mavericks forward Dirk Nowitzki. "That's something that comes with winning and me helping my team win. That's really what I do, I try to approach every game the same and try to help my team win. If I'm an All-Star, great, if Josh (Howard) or somebody else can be an All-Star, that's great. I don't really think about it.

"Obviously being an All-Star is a great accomplishment in this league and just being in that elite group means a lot. When I made it for the first time, just to be in the locker room and get to know some of those guys away from basketball was a great experience. You usually just see them on the court and you can't really get to know them. Being there and being in that group was just an amazing feeling."

Nowitzki isn't the only current All-Star who was awed by the experience of being there for the first time. The Houston Rockets' Yao Ming admits to being surprised and humbled by his first selection to the team.

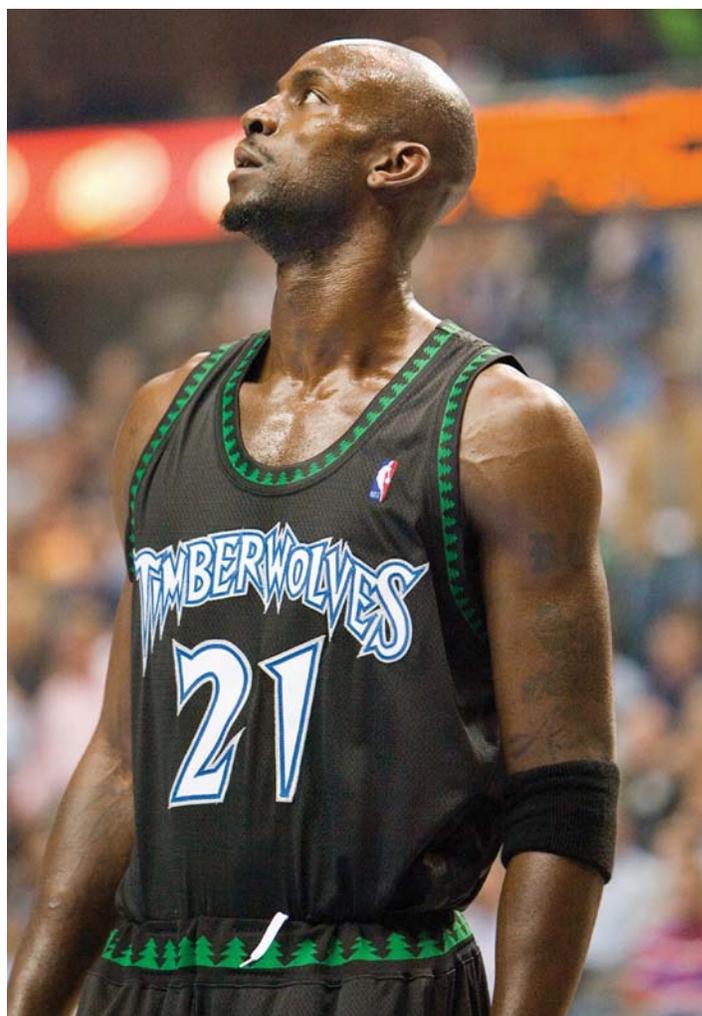
"In my first year making the All-Star game was a really big surprise for me. I know that at that time my level of playing was not at the All-Star level yet. It was really a big surprise, a big gift. It was a gift and I was not ready to play. Year after year I'm starting to enjoy going to the game. The first year I was very nervous, sitting in that locker room with all of the best players in the world sitting around me. More and more I'm trying to get myself into the game and enjoying the game. Last year I was starting to have some fun. It's like a party; it's not a very serious game. The first three quarters people just play around and then in the fourth quarter they get a little bit serious."

"Becoming an All-Star means more recognition, more respect from your peers," explains L.A. Lakers guard Kobe Bryant. "It's a level of respect that you gain. But it's just bas-

ketball, you know, something I've been doing since I was two. It's not pressure, it's just fun."

"It means a lot to me because I get voted in by the fans," says Houston's Tracy McGrady. "Any time you get voted in by the fans it's a great honor. It means that the fans respect and love what you do for the game of basketball. It's a great mid-season party to be a part of. It's great to be around the other All-Stars, the greats of this league. We go out, compete, have fun for a weekend, and that's great."

"All-Star weekend is one of the biggest events in the world in sports," says Denver Nugget Carmelo Anthony. "You've got the Super Bowl, you've got All-Star weekend, you've got the World Series and you've got the Pro Bowl. We are right up there with the elite. It's great for everybody to get together. It's a nice little break."



"Being on the All-Star team is a huge honor," says L.A. Clippers forward Elton Brand. "It solidifies your spot as one of the top 24 players in the league and that you're helping your team out and winning games. It means that your team is playing well and that you're playing well. I've had great stats before, but guys with stats don't always make the All-Star team unless their team is winning. I feel that's the way it should be."

"You can never, you can never describe it," beams Washington's Gilbert Arenas. "I heard it from Scottie Pippen. He said, 'Every All-Star Game you make, you remember it - you enjoy it.' The first was great, but the first, second, third ... y'know, I enjoy them all. I enjoy all the festivities. You know, when you're not there, that's when you miss it and I don't wanna feel that right now."

"My favorite was when I came up in the dunk contest," recalls Phoenix Sun Amare Stoudemire. "Me and Steve (Francis) did a few good dunks and that's probably been the best memory for me; and when I got the MVP of the rookie-sophomore game. I think the main thing with myself is that we're doing great as a team and when you do great as a team, then the individual accolades come afterward."

"Having your name announced and coming across the stage is special," says teammate Shawn Marion. "Knowing you're an All-Star and that you've made it. It's like a homecoming to me this year. It'll be good to play in front of some of my old college fans and UNLV family, so I'm good."

"It's great to represent my teammates - also my family and God," says Orlando Magic standout Dwight Howard. "I want to get out there and represent the right way. It's just a great honor for me. It doesn't matter if it's coaches or fans (who vote you in)."

San Antonio Spurs head coach Gregg Popovich understands different players view the game in different ways, as some of the league's best just demonstrated. Popovich explains that however players view the game it is a confirmation for the players chosen to participate.

"I think that's a very individual kind of thing, so it's dangerous to generalize," says Popovich. "In most cases I think it helps a player establish his confidence in a really true sense. It's like a confirmation that he is a heck of a player because everybody says he's a heck of a player. He might have thought he was or he might have been thinking he probably was, but that's a heck of a confirmation to become an All-Star. In that regard it's a positive thing. At that point I think all players handle it differently. Some people expect more in a variety of ways, whether that might be touches or money or for others it might be continuing to go about their business and do what they've always done. Some people react differently from others, but overall I think it's a positive thing for the player and for the organization."

"I think it says something about your team," adds Mavericks coach Avery Johnson. "Last year, fortunately, our coaching staff was able to participate. Dirk (Nowitzki) was able to participate, Jet (Jason Terry). Obviously it says that you're doing something good. I'd like to see six players represent us this year."

"It's huge," says Pacers coach Rick Carlisle of the All-Star experience. "It's huge visibility for the franchise and it's always a testament to the level that Jermaine O'Neal plays at. It's a big deal, and the thing that I like about Jermaine is he never takes it for granted. He keeps working. This past summer was probably his most productive in terms of condition-



ing and working on skills and the long haul that is the NBA season. It's great to have a guy who is already an All-Star but keeps working on getting better."

"It's always a great accomplishment because it confirms a player's status in the league and I think that has an effect on their home fans," adds Pacers General Manager Donnie Walsh. "There's a lot of pride in the community for players who reach that status. We've had quite a few over the years, as many as three in one game. It's always a treat to have one and I know it's a big thing for our community when we have a player from Indianapolis in it."

Houston Rockets coach Jeff Van Gundy believes an All-Star appearance coming courtesy of the coaches' vote holds special meaning. "I think it's great for the player, particularly if he's voted in by the coaches," says Van Gundy. "To me *that's* a great honor."

"I think being voted in by the coaches is sometimes even more important than the fan vote," agrees Mavericks forward Jerry Stackhouse. "Sometimes guys that just become popular are automatically in the All-Star game no matter how they're playing. I think when you're voted in by the coaches that really lets you know that you deserve it."

Carlisle agrees to a certain extent.

"Often times the fan voting comes down to which players have commercials on TV and things of that nature during that time of the season. Jermaine O'Neal's been voted in by the fans several times and he's been voted in by the coaches at

least twice. One way or the other he's going to get there."

"Both have their value, so to speak," says Walsh diplomatically. "It's good to have both. Obviously if you're voted in by the fans that's the greatest honor you can get as a player. I think that says a lot to the player himself."

"I think it's validation," confirms Stackhouse. "A lot of guys feel that they've had All-Star seasons or are even playing at the All-Star level, but until you're able to go to those games and get acknowledged by your peers or the coaches you're not really an All-Star. It means you're definitely starting to establish yourself league-wide. Everything is centered around your team when you're on your team, but in this business things can change and you can be somewhere else. Being an All-Star is something you carry with you no matter where you go. If you've made it to All-Star you're already considered an All-Star by your teammates, coaches, and pretty much everybody in the organization. Once you've made it to a game then that same recognition is felt across the league."

Stackhouse's head coach can speak volumes about the ripple effect of being an All-Star. Though never making an appearance himself, Avery Johnson spent 15 seasons in the NBA, made the playoffs ten times and won a championship alongside All-Stars David Robinson and Tim Duncan. Last season his Mavericks had the best record in the Western Conference, meaning he got to coach the game he was never able to play in.

"It was kind of different," says Johnson, "just to see all of those guys there and see how guys can elbow each other when their teams are playing each other and then to see them come

Blackman shares some fond memories of his All-Star experiences and some of the Hall-of-Famers who he shared the court with.

"For me, the shining moment was just being an All-Star. That was being and playing and scoring and being a part of four of them. An important factor for me was that I scored well in all of them and established myself as an All-Star while I was there. I got on the court and played and hooped and it wasn't a thing where I was out of place. Once I got to the 1987 game and already had such respect from everybody that I even had the last play designed for me by Pat Riley. We had Magic, Kareem, and guys like that and Riley was looking at me as a clutch performer and told them to get the ball to Ro. ALRIGHT!"

That was the 1987 All-Star game in Seattle, and Blackman made history. On a team that featured legends like Hakeem Olajuwon, Magic Johnson, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, it was Blackman who made the crucial free throws with no time on the clock, sending the game to overtime and allowed the West to eventually come up with a win.

"Being on the line at the end of regulation in Seattle was like a childhood dream sequence and it came true," says Blackman, still excited by the memory. "We all do that when we're playing with our friends . . . the clock is at zero . . . you're at the line . . . you have to make both shots. When it happened I was thinking I had been through it thousands of times, but it was always a dream. Here I was living it. To be able to come through with the free throws. It helped knowing there wasn't going to be any negativity at all after the game. I was always a team player. Tom Chambers played very well also. He and Magic did a great

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“A lot of guys feel that they've had All-Star seasons or are even playing at the All-Star level, but until you're able to go to those games and get acknowledged by your peers or the coaches you're not really an All-Star.” *Mavericks forward Jerry Stackhouse*

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together for that one night. They kind of kid each other, somebody dunked on somebody or somebody's team beat somebody else's team. It's good to see that they have such a high level of respect for one another. That's what I was most impressed with."

Last season Mavericks assistant coach Rolando Blackman did something not too many players have done; after appearing in four All-Star games as a player, he got a chance to coach one.

"It was a lot of fun and a great feeling of accomplishment," says Blackman, who now serves as the Mavericks' Director of Player Development. "Every time I walked through the locker room I was looking around and feeling good just to be on Avery Johnson's staff and have the opportunity to be in that place. It was great having a chance to be an All-Star coach, being announced to a worldwide audience, people everywhere seeing us on the All-Star staff. It was just a nice time. Winning or losing wasn't really the highest priority in my mind, but just to be in that situation, to have won all the games to be in first place with the Dallas Mavericks, and to have a chance to represent our team was fantastic."

job coming down the stretch playing pick-and-roll. It was fantastic. He had 34 points, he was home, he got the All-Star MVP, so I felt good about it. I was on the winning team."

One of the guys Blackman used to play against is hoping an All-Star appearance for one of his young guns can be the start of something special.

"It would definitely be good for us for Brandon Roy to make the Rookie Game," says Blazers head coach Nate McMillan. "We're trying to rebuild this organization, this team. They've had a lot of success over the years and for the last three, four, five years we haven't had that success. We're basically trying to transform this team and we're doing it through the draft and through the young guys. It is a slow process, but we've added some very good young players. Brandon Roy, we hope, will be playing in the Rookie Game during All-Star weekend and that would be big for our team."

"That would be great," confirms Roy. "That's why it's good they have the Rookie/Sophomore Game in there because it gives the younger players a chance to go and be a part of that

great weekend. I would be excited to be there and I would be even more excited if LaMarcus (Aldridge) was able to be there and Jarrett Jack was able to be there – three Portland players. That would be really big for our organization to have three young players playing in that game.”

The Dallas Mavericks certainly don’t need All-Stars to pump up their PR. “The Team That Mark Built” is fresh off a Finals appearance and appears to be headed for another successful season. The league’s most visible owner is still concerned with the marketing aspect that comes into play with the All-Star spectacle. He admits international voting makes it harder to market his players to the fans.

“It’s important to the Mavs because it’s such an honor for the players involved,” says Mark Cuban. “Plus it’s fun for the fans to root for their home team guys in the All-Star Game. So we put energy into the voting, but we have reduced our efforts because of the international online voting. It’s almost impossible to overcome the millions of votes coming from outside North America.”

“This is one of the issues that comes along with globalization of basketball, and the NBA in particular,” adds Mavericks assistant coach Del Harris. “You want to involve all of the other nations in buying shirts, caps and all of the souvenir items so you have to let them vote. We can’t control who they vote for any more than we can anybody else, so it’s just one of those things. For now it’s five spots and they’re voting in legitimate NBA players. Are they the five *best* players? No, quite often not. Nonetheless, the coaches get to select seven of them. Right now, all in all, it’s a great thing that there is world-wide interest.

“In terms of marketing there is no question that the NBA and its franchises are driven by the emphasis on star players and the marketing of the star players,” Harris continues. Certainly if you have a couple of All-Stars it increases your chances of having a good team and they become much more marketable and it becomes quite popular to be for the team that’s in your city.”

“We are the players that we put on the court,” offers Houston Rockets General Manager Carroll Dawson. “That’s who a franchise is.

We were fortunate even before we had Tracy we had Yao Ming and Steve Francis, so we’ve had two every year for quite a while. I’m not sure Yao would have to be an All-Star to be the most popular player in the world. It’s just amazing – since we’ve had him the number of people I’ve talked to all around the world is just amazing. He’s got to be one of the most popular athletes on Earth. Marketing-wise, interest-wise, he gets people in the building and he means everything to this franchise.”

No one understands the importance of marketing the NBA

All-Star game better than Todd Krinsky, Reebok’s VP of Sports and Entertainment Marketing.

“I think it’s a chance for our consumers to see athletes in a different light,” says Krinsky. “It’s competitive, but it’s a lighter weekend, so you get to see more of guys’ off-court personalities. They’re relevant to young people in more ways than just their style of play, so it’s a chance for them to relate to the players a little more. Players are different on the court, as well. Al doesn’t shoot the ball as much as he does during the regular season. He’s looking for guys more, he’s smiling more, so it’s a good showcase for the personalities of our players to come out.”

Yao Ming is the other perennial All-Star who sports the Reebok brand, and like the Rockets, Krinsky understands the importance of the interest level Yao brings to the table.

“He’s someone that’s a global icon – there are very few global icons in the world. The Olympics are coming up in two years in Beijing, so he’s quickly becoming a prominent face for us in basketball. We’re able to launch technologies with him and brand messages with him and we’re doing a lot to activate him in China. It’s a grassroots initiative. Last year we had Allen Iverson and Yao together in Shanghai, which is his hometown, so we really do a lot

with Yao in the community, take him back to China a lot, so it’s been phenomenal. It’s also really good to put Allen Iverson and Yao Ming together because they can represent different parts of the world, different cultures, different people. When you put them together it’s a pretty cool experience. We toured Asia this year. He’s a huge part of our plan moving forward.”

Having an All-Star is important to a shoe company.

“It’s definitely important,” explains Krinsky. “All-Star is a showcase for footwear. Every year you see guys wearing funkier color waves and different shoes because it’s the one time of the year when they can wear whatever they want. In the sneaker wars, so to speak, it’s important to have a player out there who can wear something different or funky that they can’t wear during the season because of NBA regulations. It’s also important because it’s the premier players in the league. It’s important for us as a basketball brand to have our presentation there. The NBA is

really the front line of the sneaker wars.”

The NBA playoffs signify the most important time of the season for any single team, but when it comes to the biggest league-wide spectacle the All-Star game is by far the bigger event. Whether it’s helping a struggling franchise get back on its feet, giving a rising star validation, rewarding a player for individual excellence, or serving as the front line for the sneaker wars, it’s clear that the NBA All-Star game is one of the most important events of the year for sports fans across the globe.



## THEY SAID IT

**Coaches Corner**

"I still don't know who we are. If you ask me who we are, I'm really not sure. We've had moments of playing well and moments where we've struggled. It's kind of a roller coaster ride that has something to do with my coaching I'm sure."

**Utah Jazz Coach Jerry Sloan, assessing his team after a third of the season.**

"We're in the right division. It's an amazing division. If you have three or four days off, you probably move up to first place. The key in our division is not playing right now. That's almost how you feel. Toronto had four days off and moved up to first place."

**Boston Celtics Coach Doc Rivers, on the Atlantic Division's struggles.**

"Yes."

**Portland Trail Blazers Coach Nate McMillan, grinning after cutting off a reporter who tried to ask him if rookie Sergio Rodriguez ever scared him with his passing.**

"He had enough stats for a half. He probably thought, 'Ah I've got 15 points, must be halftime.' That was pretty funny..."

**Phoenix Suns Coach Mike D'Antoni, on Shawn Marion running to the locker room after the first quarter.**

"Most of the time when you call a guy after you've traded him he doesn't want to talk to you. I mean, that's the last thing he wants. And Andre, even when he was on my team didn't return my phone calls very often."

**Denver Nuggets Coach George Karl, on talking with Andre Miller post-trade.**

"I'm too young to have a doghouse. He was in a bedroom I didn't like."

**Dallas Mavericks Coach Avery Johnson, after a bad game by Jason Terry.**

"I don't know what the players think, but if there's a team in Portofino I'm there."

**San Antonio Spurs Coach Gregg Popovich, on possible worldwide NBA expansion.**

### Fans Aren't the Only Ones Saving Something

By Jason Fleming

Many fans will go to an event – especially one like the NBA All-Star Game – and want to take something home from it; something to remind them of the experience. Or, some just want to be able to point and say, “That proves I was there!” Fans aren’t the only ones.

NBA players are just as likely to want to take a piece of the game home with them. Of course, while a fan may get a program, a magnet, a soda cup, or maybe even a replica jersey, a player brings home his own jersey or a ball replete with signatures from all of his teammates.

“I just like to get my jersey signed by all the All-Stars,” said Houston Rockets guard Tracy McGrady. “That’s what I do every year. I can look back when I get older and show my kids.”

Considering McGrady has been an All-Star six times, that’s one impressive wall and many great stories he can tell his children.

Even the players who only have one of those jerseys treasure them.

“We got a little ring and then I got my jersey signed by everybody,” said San Antonio Spurs guard Manu Ginobili, who played in the 2005 game. “I have them and it’s a great memory.”

Ginobili isn’t the only one who treasures his memories. Utah Jazz guard Deron Williams played in the Rookie-Sophomore Challenge last season and that was his favorite part.

“Just memories,” said Williams on what he takes home with him. “What’s in my head will never go away.”

“It was such an amazing experience - I’ll never forget it.”

Not every player keeps things for himself. Family members – and moms in particular – are commonly the recipients of some of the most desired memorabilia around.

“My mom keeps all my trophies,” Denver Nuggets guard Allen Iverson said with a big smile. “I don’t think I have anything



except probably uniforms.” In Iverson’s case, Mom’s collection includes the two All-Star MVP awards he has received in seven appearances.

Iverson’s Nuggets teammate Marcus Camby, putting up fantastic numbers this season, has never played in an All-Star Game. But if he does, Mom would get a great present.

“I would probably keep my jersey,” said Camby. “I would keep my jersey and give it to my mom in a frame. She has all of my jerseys since high school, so that would be pretty special.”

“Of course I’m saving that jersey!” said Carmelo Anthony.

Sometimes players don’t even get to find what they set out to get. Dallas Mavericks

forward Dirk Nowitzki had plans on what he wanted to bring home, but in the heat of the moment it simply slipped his mind.

“Usually everyone gets their shoes signed,” said Nowitzki. “But I forgot about it – it’s such a mess after the game. There are hundreds of media people trying to get to you and you’re trying to get out of there and fly home...it’s a mess.”

Nowitzki doesn’t really feel like he is missing anything, though. Like Williams, the memories he has of the All-Star Game will be something he has forever.

“All of my memories are right here,” Nowitzki continued, pointing to his head. “It’s a great thing – the first time I was able to share it with Steve (Nash), my best friend, and then built this organization with him. That I was able to share that great moment with him in Philly was unbelievable.”

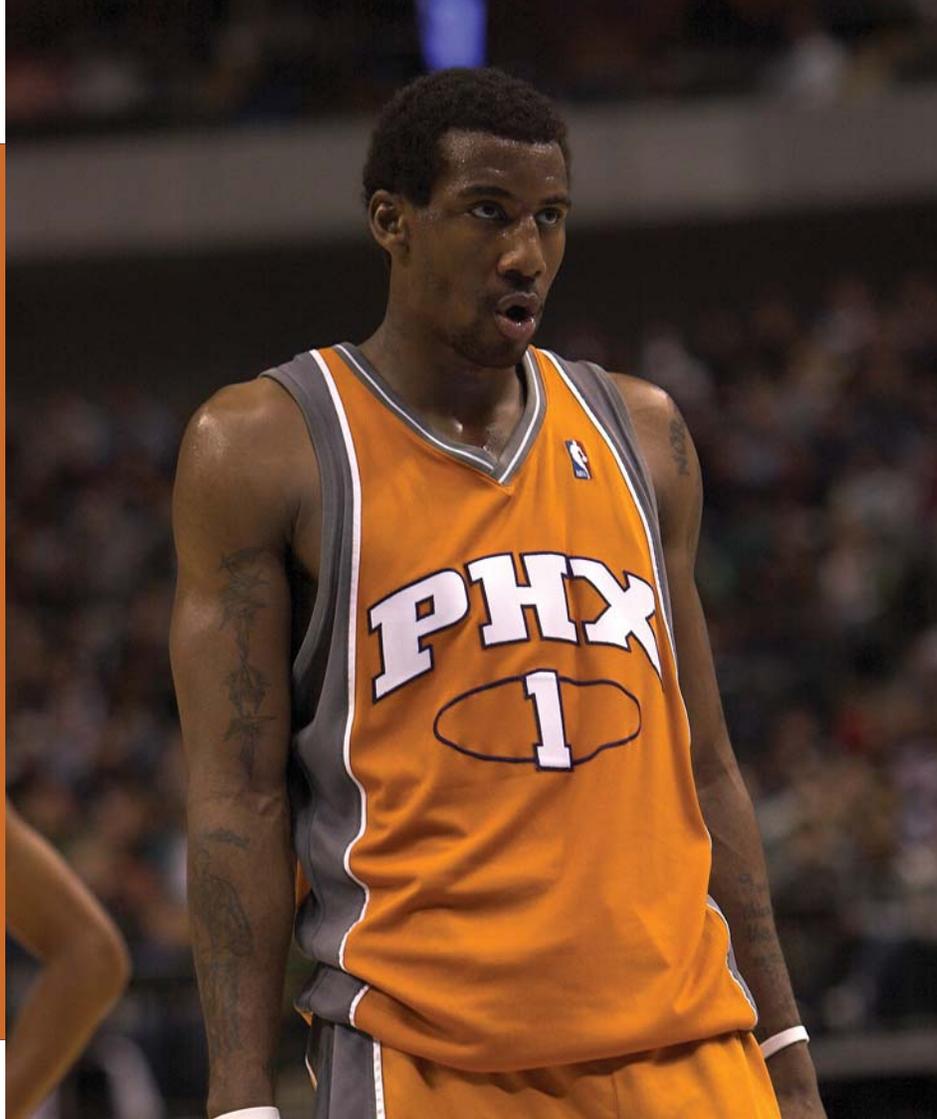
It’s not signed jerseys to hang on the wall and shoes to put in a display case for Houston Rockets center Yao Ming, who has been an All-Star every season in the league. The Chinese phenom collects bobbleheads of team mascots.

“I get some bobbleheads every year,” said Yao. “Some shirts, too. Things like that.”

Different people have different things in mind when they think of souvenirs. For some it’s a magnet to bring home and slap on the Frigidaire; for others it’s a jersey with a special patch, something they only wear for special occasions; for still others it’s the memory of having been there and the stories they can tell, perhaps coupled with a few nice digital images of them and their favorite player.

For an NBA All-Star it’s the same. Some of them have keepsakes to show their children, or something special to give to Mom. Some have autographed shoes, jerseys, or a ball to go in their personal display case. For others, the experience and the memory is enough.

Just like the fan in the stands.



# Rising like a Phoenix from the Ashes...

## Amare Stoudemire Proves You *Can* Come Back

By Greg White

In ancient Egyptian mythology the phoenix is a bird that, at the end of its life cycle, burns itself to ashes. Out of the ashes a new, young phoenix arises. Also, when wounded, the Phoenix was able to regenerate itself. Amare Stoudemire, All-Star forward of the Phoenix Suns, likens his return to the court after a devastating knee injury and two knee surgeries to the life of this mythical bird.

"The phoenix is a bird that reincarnates itself, and I pretty much reincarnated my game, coming back from two knee surgeries. The phoenix bird is the only bird that can do that, and I am probably the only person to come back from two knee surgeries in the same season," said Amare.

Before going forward, let's go back to the end of the Suns 2004-05 season. After adding Steve Nash and Quentin Richardson to the mix, the Suns won a league-high 62 games. They scored 110 points per game and made it to the Western Conference Finals, only to lose to the San Antonio Spurs in 5 games. A star emerged before our very eyes. Amare Stoudemire averaged 37 ppg against possibly the best big man

in the game in Tim Duncan.

The Suns saw the need to improve defensively by going out and adding both Kurt Thomas and Raja Bell. They also traded Joe Johnson for Boris Diaw which brought even more versatility to perhaps the most versatile team in the league. With the excitement building, Amare Stoudemire signed a new contract extension, the Suns looked like they were the favorites to win the NBA title.

At the time the Suns were on top of the world, but devastating news hit; Amare Stoudemire would require micro-fracture surgery on his left knee. Nearly every player that had undergone this operation had never been the same. Chris Webber, Kenyon Martin, Allan Houston - the list goes on and on. Since then Jason Kidd and Zach Randolph have both proven it can be done, but at that point Stoudemire's future in the league was a question mark.

The timetable for Amare's return ranged anywhere from 6 months to one year. For a player whose game was built mostly on raw talent and athleticism, how would he ever be the player

he was, let alone the player he could have possibly been?

While Amare rehabilitated his knee, the Suns surprised everyone but themselves and started winning. They took a step back from the 62 wins in 2004-05, but still finished with the league's fourth-best record with 54 wins. The new additions of Raja Bell, Kurt Thomas, James Jones, and Boris Diaw worked out seamlessly and a mid-season addition of Tim Thomas fit a need well. All everyone could wonder was just how good this team would be when Amare came back.

Amare tried to come back. He came out strong in his first game, scoring 19 points, but the lift wasn't there and neither was the explosion. The comeback was aborted only two games later; Amare had to undergo another surgery, this time on his right knee. Fluid had to be drained and cleaned out. He was favoring his surgically repaired knee and putting too much stress on his good knee. The one thing Amare wasn't prepared for was just how hard, physically and mentally, his rehab was going to be.

Suns' Head Athletic Trainer Aaron Nelson said it was difficult for Amare. "There was a big mental hurdle. He never had to deal with anything like that before. He had only dealt with just toe and ankle injuries. It was hard. We didn't let him give up, though. I was trying to push him and I kind of come off as the bad guy. He would hate me for it 'cause I would push him and hold him responsible for what he did. He was frustrated wondering if he would ever get over it. We told him he would get there. We didn't know when but we knew that he would get there. He wanted it *now* and didn't realize the kind of a process it would take."

Amare still finds it hard to talk about that time period. "It was tough, coming back from an injury so severe. It was the hardest thing I've ever been apart of as far as basketball," he said with a big sigh, showing just how difficult a time he had with it. "I don't like to think about it 'cause it was so tough. I pray every night that He (God) keeps me from getting a severe injury like that again. I got so frustrated at times. You want to play, but you can't play. You want to run, but you can't

run. You want to exercise, but you can't exercise. It even goes back to you can't even walk."

With the mental hurdles he faced after such a major surgery Amare decided he would wait until the following season before playing again.

Not only did he have to deal with his own mental and physical issues, but he had to deal with people in his ear, on TV, on the radio, and in print doubting he would ever be the same again.

"He couldn't dismiss the thoughts of not being the same. He always had it in his head," said Nelson. "He talked to other guys that had the surgery done. He had so many people in his ear telling him he would struggle and might not be the same.

We [Dr. Tom Carter, who performed the surgery, along with Nelson and his staff] kept telling him he would get there. We didn't just tell him that just trying to make Amare feel good, we believed it. I had great confidence in Dr. Carter and knew he did a great surgery. Amare had a good team in place to make sure he succeeded and at that point it was up to him.

"For him to get over that mental hurdle, it was hard. He had a lot of people telling him he won't be able to do this, and reading it in the paper and hearing it on TV. And he is young, and so he had to be scared. This is his career and he wants to be the best and all of a sudden, where is he? All we could do was give him the tools and push him. If he didn't want to do it he wouldn't have done it, but he pushed himself through it and got there."

As he worked through the thoughts of possibly not being the athletic beast that he was before the surgery, Amare knew he had to improve other aspects of his game. "While I was out, I was thinking about defense and trying to become a great defensive player. I figured that if I studied the game from that aspect, when my athleticism does come back, I will be that much better of a player. I'm trying to have the best of both worlds. I watched my teammates a lot, watched guys that defend really well like Kurt Thomas, Raja Bell and Shawn Marion. I studied the game of basket-

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“He has become so efficient. He has taken his game to that level that he can be deadly and dangerous on both ends of the court without demanding the ball and being the focus.”

*James Jones*

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**Miami Herald Writer  
Israel Gutierrez  
TWICE per week at  
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ball, trying to get better.”

To even get to where he *could* become a better defensive player, he had to improve his work ethic. “He knew he had to grow,” Nelson added. “The coaches, Marc Iavaroni and Phil Webber, did a great job with him. They worked on different aspects of his game to make him more of a complete player. He had to, because you can’t go your whole career off of raw talent. He’s got that and it’s scary - it’s freakish! But at some point it catches up with you and no matter how athletic you are you just don’t keep it as you get older. He was able to work on the rest of the stuff. He worked on his ball handling, his jump shot. Before he was just getting inside, turn around and dunking, using his power - he had a little bit of a jump shot but he has made himself more of a complete player.”

While there had been talk in the past that Amare didn’t have the best work ethic, he certainly put that talk to rest.

In that transition is the maturation, the reincarnation of Amare Stoudemire.

“It was a maturity thing,” said Assistant Coach Marc Iavaroni. “Instead of looking at Steve Nash winning the MVP awards and saying that he wants what Steve has, it’s more of him wanting to work with this guy ‘cause he is special. He has always said he wanted to be a great teammate and just didn’t know how. He has tried to fit in and not be focal point, but be one of a multi-speared attack. He prioritized his defense.

“He talked to Coach D’Antoni many times, who told him we can win a championship if he plays great defense inside and is a presence around the basket and his awareness goes up. He told Amare that if he is true to what he says about

wanting to win, he has to do it at the defensive end as well.”

Not only did Amare have to reinvent his game, he also had to reacquaint himself with the team. He may have sat and watched the new guys as he rehabbed, but integrating his game to the team was the final step.

How would this new, more mature, defensive-minded Amare blend with the Suns’ players who won 54 games without him?

According to teammate James Jones, a lot of credit goes to how Amare has now approached the game. “He went from a guy who was an offensive juggernaut and on defense took a step back to a guy who is giving it on both ends. Amare isn’t touching the ball every time down the floor, but is still getting 20 points and 12 rebounds at times. He has become so efficient. He has taken his game to that level that he can be deadly and dangerous on both ends of the court without demanding the ball and being the focus. He has become unselfish in allowing other guys around him to take a piece of the pie and at the same time still dominant as if he is giving up nothing.”

So far this season he is scoring over 18 points a night on a career-high shooting percentage, while averaging a career-high in rebounds.

Another player who had a successful season the year Amare was down, also acknowledged how Amare has conformed himself to the team. “He has been a great addition to what we are trying to do,” said Raja Bell. “We understand that to get to over the hump, we are going to need his presence. It has been an adjustment and is still a work in progress but leaps and bounds from where it was at the beginning of the season. And we will get better, no doubt.”

The “new” Amare has not only changed on the court, but off the court as well. The team has become a closer group, hanging out together and enjoying each other’s company. “We enjoy each other as players, as friends, and as teammates. We get along on and off the court, hang out with each others’ families. It’s a beautiful thing,” said Amare.

In addition to the closeness of the team, Amare is going through a reincarnation of his personal life too. During the offseason he changed his number from 32 to 1. He opened a restaurant in downtown Phoenix across the street from the US Airways Arena called *Stoudemire’s Downtown*. He also witnessed the birth of his first son (his other child is a girl). All of these changes took place as Amare was still going through the transition of trying to get healthy for the upcoming season.

Both the birth of his son and his number change hold special significance to him. “The number change is spiritual to me and is done to represent kids in poverty. It means ‘Each

One, Teach One.” He wants to help teach others, and in turn those kids teach and help others as well.

The birth of his son helped get him back on his feet. “I wanted to bounce back from this injury so that I can tell my son that whatever he goes through as an athlete or in life it’s going to be hard, but you still have to fight through it and you can become successful. The struggles in my life have helped me. When going through trials and tribulations, I try to keep my eyes in the Bible. I read it a lot, it motivates me. My dedication is to God.”

It is that focus on improving defensively, the focus on being a better teammate, a better person, and the near seamless transition to a new crop of guys after putting himself on the edge of superstardom that has propelled the Suns to a dominant start to the 2006-07 season.

The Suns have multiple double-digit winning streaks and are leading the league in many offensive categories from points to three-pointers to assists.

The only knock on the Suns has been their defense and even that can be deceiving. While knocked for giving up over 100 points a game, they are first in point differential.

Boris Diaw feels the answer to the defensive question is simple: “Our tempo is so fast, so there are going to be a lot of shots. As long as we hold a team to a low shooting percentage, and get good defensive stops down the stretch, we will win games.”

And win games they have.

Despite the fact that the Suns haven’t made it to the NBA Finals yet, they still know that they are hunted. The expectations are great and the targets on their backs are large.

“It isn’t anything we have to do, they keep themselves focused,” said Iavaroni. “75-85% of that is Steve Nash coming to work everyday and Amare focusing on his rehab. It is a close-knit group and nobody wants to let anybody else down. Our veteran guys like Raja Bell and Shawn Marion keep their focus.”

“We don’t get ahead of ourselves. We take it one game at a time,” said Marion. “It’s that simple. You can’t jump ahead to something you don’t have. Everyone has goals but the reality is you can’t see the prize. We know there is always room for



improvement, and every time we step on the floor we go out there and try to make each other that much better.”

As Amare has risen from the ashes, the team as a whole is on a mission. The team motto is “Eyes On the Prize” as they look to advance further into the playoffs.

“I am trying to reach my full potential and winning championships is part of that,” reiterated Amare. “We are getting better defensively, trying to play good basketball, and do what it takes to win a championship.”

Just like that phoenix, Amare Stoudemire has risen from the ashes. He and the Suns look to go further than they ever have as a group, and they understand it will take each one of them to get there.

**Jonathan Feigen**

**Houston Chronicle Writer  
Jonathan Feigen  
TWICE per week at  
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### James Doesn't Feel Pressure

By Eric Pincus

I first saw LeBron James at Pauley Pavilion at my alma mater, UCLA. It was in 2003 when he was a senior at St. Vincent-St. Mary's High. Back then he had to cover the tattoos on his adult-like arms with patches.

The exhibition against Mater Dei High was sold out. The game aired nationally on ESPN2.

He was okay; didn't knock my socks off.

In fact, as he went through the draft process and became the supposed savior for the moribund Cleveland Cavaliers, I began to refer to him as "LeHype".

The nickname never caught on, dying 48 minutes into his NBA career when he dropped 25 points, nine assists and six boards in a losing effort to the Sacramento Kings.

No, it became clear very quickly that James was indeed the real deal. But still, wasn't the praise lavished upon him a bit much? He couldn't even get the Cavs to the playoffs.

For all his gaudy numbers, physics-defying dunks . . . James wouldn't defend a lick and couldn't hit the big shot. To win me over, he had a long way to go. Sure enough, a couple of seasons later the Cavaliers would become a legitimate playoff contender.

As far as that big shot thing, James tortured the Washington Wizards in the first round of the 2006 playoffs and pushed the veteran Detroit Pistons to seven games. Game winners in playoff games? So much for my "lack of clutchness" theory...

I didn't even like his Nike commercials when they first came out; thought they were bland.

Now, I can't help but enjoy the slick dude with the cell phone do the high dive in his top dollar suit.

Frankly, I've given up doubting the guy. I'm sick of James showing me up.

As the Cavs make their way to Los Angeles in January, they sit atop the Eastern Conference with a 22-13 record. The

Clippers hang with them for a half, but the Cavaliers run away with it in the second, 104-92.

It's James' first career victory at Staples Center. He's talking to the media scrum post-game about how much he and his teammates enjoy playing defense.

"It's fun. It used to be you scored on offense and it was fun. But now it's a lot of fun NOT allowing guys to score points against you," he says with a smile. "The bench is ecstatic. The guys on the floor are getting down and dirty. We're just not letting guys score on us. If they do, it's going to be contested or it's going to be a tough shot. Defense is a little more fun than offense right now."

Well, he may not be on the All-Defensive First Team yet, but my anti-LeBron list is getting mighty short.

Cleveland was coming off of an embarrassing loss to the Phoenix Suns on national TV. They're in the middle of a seven-game road trip and despite their success this season; the Cavs have had their share of struggles on the road.

How does the team deal with the pressure of winning away from home?

"It's not difficult. We've just got to keep playing like we've been playing. We can't let pressure get to us," he replies. "Me being a leader, I don't believe in it. So I kind of keep it away from my teammates and we do an excellent job of just taking it game by game. We don't think about the future, we approach every game like it's our last."

I don't get it. I mean I understand the cliché of taking it one day at a time, but what's this about no such thing as pressure?

I ask him to elaborate but he just repeats himself.



"I don't believe in pressure . . . at all," he adds for emphasis.

"How does that work?" I stammer. "For someone who does believe in pressure, can you explain what that means?"

"You only get pressure when you're successful at something," he replies. "So you just keep doing the same thing you've been doing. You don't allow pressure to affect you. You don't shy away from pressure when it comes upon you just because you're successful."

He pauses and adds, "It doesn't work that way in my eyes."

So, wait, what was that again?

But it's time to go, the team bus awaits. I watch stunned as he walks away.

What does a 22-year old know about pressure, anyway?

I'm trying to support my kids, my wife. Heck, I gotta get home . . . got myself up against a deadline.

The guy's got the entire NBA resting on his shoulders and he's talking to me about no pressure . . .

Wonder what size ring he wears?

## New Ball - Old Ball - New Ball

The NBA ball story has been beaten to death, so the attempt here is not to try and add new commentary on whether the NBA should or should not have tried to change the basketball. The goal is to shed light on the fact that while the NBA did reverse the decision in January, the discussion has not stopped on changing the ball at some point in the future - possibly even next year.

The NBA and Spalding are hard at work, still looking to design a ball that will both meet with the players' approval and provide a more uniform and consistent composite surface. The knock on the old ball continues to be that the "all-leather" surface is inconsistent in its bounce. Not that the players were complaining, but the leather ball does take some time to break in - meaning no two balls bounce exactly the same.

It should come as no surprise Spalding and the NBA have a fairly new deal together; its not hard math to make the leap that new ball equals new revenue streams for both the NBA and Spalding - getting the players to "buy in" was over-looked the first time around. This time the NBA plans to get the players' approval before replacing the most important aspect of the game.

So while the all-leather ball is back in the NBA game, its return may not be as long-lived as many had thought.

### Losing Money?

Several small-market NBA owners recently sent a letter to NBA commissioner David Stern voicing concerns over the state of the economics in the league. The message was simple: all is not well on the financial front for some of the smaller NBA teams.

The letter, signed off on by eight of the league's smaller-market teams, explained the situation in the following way:

"The hard truth is that our current economic system works only for larger-market teams and a few teams that have extraordinary success on the court and for the latter group of teams, only when they experience extraordinary success. The rest of us are looking at significant and unacceptable financial losses."

The Milwaukee Bucks, Portland Trail Blazers, Memphis Grizzlies, Charlotte Bobcats, Utah Jazz, New Orleans Hornets, Indiana Pacers, and Minnesota Timberwolves all signed off on this letter.

With all due respect, the Blazers at one point had a \$100 million payroll and they are sitting on a payroll over \$73 million this season. The Timberwolves signed Kevin Garnett to his second \$100 million contract and have a payroll of over \$65 million. The Hornets chose to leave Charlotte for the smaller New Orleans market, and the Bobcats knew the challenges the Hornets were having in Charlotte with attendance before they paid \$350 million in expansion fees to put a team there.

The problem with the logic of the owners who signed this letter is they control their own profitability. Every single team mentioned above, save the Bobcats, is radically over the \$45 million salary cap. Every single team mentioned above has an estimated franchise value worth millions more than they paid for the teams.

David Stern answered the letter admitting there was more to be done for all the teams in the NBA, not just smaller-market teams.

Stern joked with the *Wall Street Journal* about the letter, saying: "We have lots

of teams that aren't profitable. And the last one just sold for \$350 million. What a bunch of unsophisticated buyers, eh? Isn't it share price, for shareholder value? We have 30 shares. In 1979, the Dallas Mavericks expansion club went for \$12 million dollars and in 2003, the Charlotte Bobcats sold for \$300 million cash. Of course, then its owner promptly signed the letter. Think about that. OK. Welcome to my world."

### Big Summer in Vegas

The NBA says it doesn't want to do business in Vegas until the game is removed from sports books. That hasn't stopped the calendar in the desert from filling up with NBA-related events.

Warren LeGarie's annual NBA summer league is expected to return to Vegas this July. He hinted recently his group may no longer be running the two-week showcase of rookies and young talent, saying he thought the NBA would take over the league this summer and expand it from 16 teams to 24 teams.

Las Vegas also won the right to host the FIBA Tournament of Americas games, slated for late July, at The Thomas & Mack Center. Team USA needs to win a gold medal to qualify for the 2008 Olympics, meaning the NBA's best will be in the desert for that event, as well.

Last but not least, the NBA's All-Star Weekend is being crammed into Vegas this year amid many national conventions and housed in a venue far older and smaller than your normal All-Star venue.

If the NBA doesn't want to be in Las Vegas, they sure are sending a mixed message. And That's the Last Word...

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