

sound, the stadium exploding into a sea of joyous celebration.

Ewing and Olajuwon have seen themselves thrusting their arms in the air, beaming, looking toward the heavens and thanking the man above, tightly clutching the championship trophy, champagne dripping from their brows, teary-eyed.

Like Michael Jordan did. Like Isaiah Thomas did. Like Magic Johnson and Larry Bird did.

"I can't help but think about it," says Olajuwon.

Neither can Ewing.

"It's natural," says Ewing. "I've been in the league for nine years. I've seen a lot of guys celebrate. But we're a championship-level team. This is the time to capitalize, to go get it. Hopefully, this is the year."

Olajuwon essentially says the same thing—and the irony is that they could collide head-on in June.

But only one can walk away with the jewelry.

**O**lajuwon has advanced to the NBA Finals once in his 10-year career. That was in 1986, his second season in the league, when the Rockets lost to the Boston Celtics, four games to two.

Ewing has never made a Finals appearance. The closest he's gotten was last year when the Knicks fell to the Chicago Bulls in six games in the Eastern Conference finals.

The prospects of the two noble big men meeting for the championship is intriguing, but much stands in their way, particularly for Olajuwon and the Rockets. There's Charles Barkley and the Phoenix Suns, Shawn Kemp and the Seattle SuperSonics, David Robinson and the San Antonio Spurs.

"Big obstacles," Olajuwon says.

For Ewing and the Knicks, the road to the championship is less hazardous. There's...who? The Michael Jordan-less Bulls? Good team but probably not legitimate title contenders. The Atlanta Hawks? Haven't convinced anyone just yet that they're the real deal. The Orlando Magic? The Charlotte Hornets? Not this year.

The only beast in the East is New York. Ewing speaks cautiously about the prospects of a berth in the Finals—to the media anyway. "He talks like he's already won it," says Spurs guard Sleepy Floyd, who played with Ewing at Georgetown. "He feels they should've won it last year. He talks like there's no doubt

the Knicks will be NBA champions come June."

Publicly, however, Ewing plays it down. "We have a golden opportunity, but we're not thinking that since Michael is gone that we've won any-



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—Sleepy Floyd, Spurs guard and college teammate of Ewing

thing," he says. "We're not taking anything for granted. We know everyone will be shooting for us."

Time is running out for the two great centers to realize their dreams. Both Ewing and Hakeem are 31. Over the years, young, explosive, dominant centers have popped up all around them, several in just the last

few seasons. Orlando's Shaquille O'Neal and Charlotte's Alonzo Mourning are two of them. Both are in their second season, and their teams are fast becoming championship contenders in the East. There's Dikembe Mutombo of the Denver Nuggets. He's in his third year, and the Nuggets are on the rise in the West.

Then, of course, there's San Antonio's Mr. Robinson. He's three years younger than Ewing and Olajuwon, is in just his fifth season, and the Spurs are only a point guard away from serious title contention.

To be sure, the road to a championship isn't getting easier.

And the window of opportunity for Ewing and Hakeem is shrinking.

And shrinking.

And shrinking.

**E**wing remembers the feeling of losing Game 5 of last year's Eastern Conference finals in Madison Square Garden—remembers it all too well.

"Like yesterday," he says.

He recalls the intense sadness, the anger, the fear that the opportunity to win a championship had passed him by.

"I was so down," he says. "I can't put it into words."

Then, after the Knicks were bounced from the playoffs in Game 6, Ewing sat there for a while, in the bowels of Chicago Stadium, wondering.

*How could this happen? How could we blow a 2-0 lead?*

The vision remains painfully clear of Knicks forward Charles Smith going up and missing, going up and missing, going up one last time and missing again as the clock expired, sending the Bulls into a state of ecstasy and the Knicks into a state of despair.

Ewing sighs, staring ahead blankly. His forehead wrinkles as he begins to speak: "I just hope we get another opportunity. We believe we will, but you never know. Sure, with Michael [Jordan] gone, the door is open a little wider, but...."

Ewing didn't make the playoffs in his first two seasons, and then came a dizzying series of annual early exits. A first-round ouster here, a second-round departure there. One after another.

But times have changed. The Knicks have a suffocating, championship-style defense, a top-notch head coach in Pat Riley, and with the