Ewing and Olajuwon have been the faces of the NBA for the past 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.

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

“[Ewing] talks like he’s already won it. He feels they should’ve won it last year.

He talks like there’s no doubt the Knicks will be NBA champions come June.”

—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.

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“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