

acquisition of Derek Harper they have a championship-caliber point guard.

But they don't have a championship offense, and that might lead to their demise. Yet some Knicks believe this will be the year Ewing straps them on his back and carries them to the championship.

"I think Patrick is going to be a terror in May and June," says Knicks guard Doc Rivers, sidelined for the season with a knee injury. "He's never won a championship, never won an MVP. He was ousted from the starting lineup in last year's All-Star Game [by Shaq]. He doesn't feel he's gotten the respect he deserves, and the only way he feels he'll get that respect is by winning a championship.

"Look out for Patrick in June. I'm not sure anyone will be able to stop him."

It was so long ago, the Rockets' venture into the NBA Finals. So long ago that Olajuwon can hardly recall those days—when Ralph Sampson teamed with Hakeem to form the Twin Towers, when Robert Reid and Lewis Lloyd started in the backcourt.

"When I went to the Finals that first time, I was only in my second year," Olajuwon says, "and I figured I'd get there three, four more times. I haven't been back since. I almost feel like I wasn't there, that it didn't happen. I was so young. I didn't appreciate it then as much as I'd appreciate it now. Because now I know it's a rare opportunity that doesn't come easy."

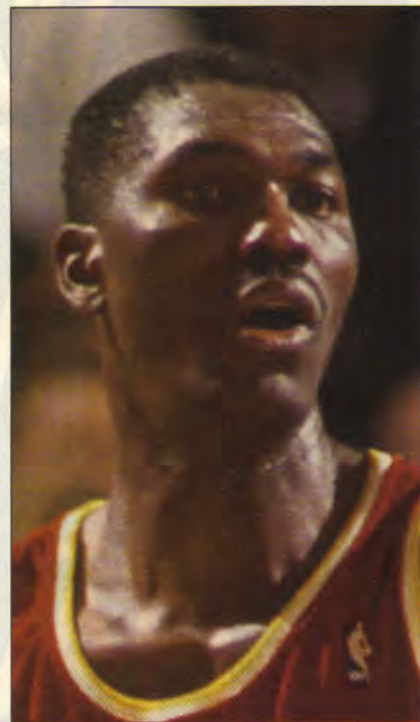
Olajuwon was unstoppable in the '86 Finals, averaging 25 points, 12 rebounds and more than three blocked shots, including an NBA-record eight blocks against Boston in Game 5 that enabled Houston to cut the Celtics' lead in games to 3-2. But Bird, Kevin McHale, Robert Parish, Dennis Johnson et al. were too much for the Rockets, who were eliminated in Game 6 at Boston Garden.

From then on, the Rockets' plight has mirrored the Knicks'. Early playoff exits, one after another. But last year, with Olajuwon signed to a four-year, \$26 million contract extension and the arrival of Rudy Tomjanovich as head coach, the Rockets put it together and emerged as a powerhouse.

They won 41 of their last 52 games last season and came within a victory of reaching the Western Conference finals. Then they shot out of

the gate this season, shocking the basketball world with a 21-1 start, and Olajuwon was being called the best player in the game, the front-runner for the NBA's MVP Award.

"We've got a good chance to win



"I don't even want to think about not ever winning an NBA championship. The emotional pain would be too much."

—Hakeem Olajuwon

it this year," Olajuwon says, "but if we don't make it, we'll have just as good a chance—or better—next year. I'm 31, but I feel great—like I'm 25. I've never suffered a serious injury, I've matured as a player, my game has grown. We've got a great coach who turned us into a championship-level club with his defensive

philosophy and emphasis on the team concept. We're a true team, not a bunch of individuals thrown on the court, chasing a ball. We're really together. We play in a total team concept, and those kinds of teams win."

There are several reasons why the Rockets are serious title contenders: the steady play of guards Vern Maxwell and Kenny Smith, the aggressive rebounding prowess of Otis Thorpe, and Tomjanovich. But at the top of the list is Hakeem.

"Not only is he the best big man in the game, he's the best player," says Sonics coach George Karl.

"The thing about Hakeem," says Tomjanovich, "is that he dominates at both ends of the court. Offensively, he's unstoppable, with a variety of moves. Defensively, people are afraid to drive the lane. He's a monster shot blocker."

Most importantly, though, Hakeem now trusts his supporting cast, enabling him to pass out of double- and triple-teams instead of forcing the shot. When the defense collapses on him now, he flips the ball out to the arc, where Maxwell and Smith can drill three-pointers.

"That really changed us as a team," says Maxwell. "We all got into the act. Playing was fun again, challenging. Seattle and Phoenix are great basketball teams, but we've proven we're as good. We believe we can win the championship, and that's the first step in doing it."

If Olajuwon and Ewing again come up empty this season, and if their careers should end without a ring, what then? "It'll hurt," says Ewing, "but that's not the way a player should be defined. There are many great players who haven't won a championship. They're still great players. They were just not fortunate to have won a championship."

Says Olajuwon: "After losing the Finals in 1986, I said, 'Next time I go, we win.' And I meant it."

Forgive Olajuwon if he's a little tired of losing in the big game. At the University of Houston, he went to the Final Four three straight times, losing every time—twice in the NCAA title game.

So when it comes to this small matter of winning a championship, Olajuwon understandably gets a little riled. "I don't even want to think about not ever winning an NBA championship," he says. "The emotional pain would be too much."★