

PRESS FOR Success

THE CHILL OF ANOTHER winter is present in the New England air as Rick Pitino, the coach of the Boston Celtics, emerges from the FleetCenter, the team's sparkling new home. Heads turn quickly as Pitino strides past, his pace as brisk as the weather. "There he is!" shrieks a woman, giving the trim, dark-haired coach the full celebrity treatment.

Heads turn everywhere Pitino goes in Boston—no, make that everywhere in New England. Whether he's walking out of the FleetCenter or the Celtics' practice facility at Brandeis University, walking into a restaurant in Boston's Italian North End section, or running along the picturesque Charles River at 6 a.m. on his daily six-mile jog, the world stops for a moment when Pitino is spotted.

One day a driver smashed his vehicle into another while gawking; people walking in the North End have been seen bumping into light posts. George Clooney, Mick Jagger, Michael Jordan, Cindy Crawford, and U.S. presidents get this kind of treatment, but a basketball coach? Well, in Boston, yes. We're talking about a man known for miracle resurrections—a virtually unparalleled run of success that began nearly 20 years ago at Boston University—taking over the most storied team in basketball. When a guy like that tackles a job like this as aggressively as Pitino has, people notice.

"Being with Rick is like hanging with Elvis," says Celtics head scout Leo Papile, a longtime friend of Pitino. "Everybody stares at him. People stop dead in their

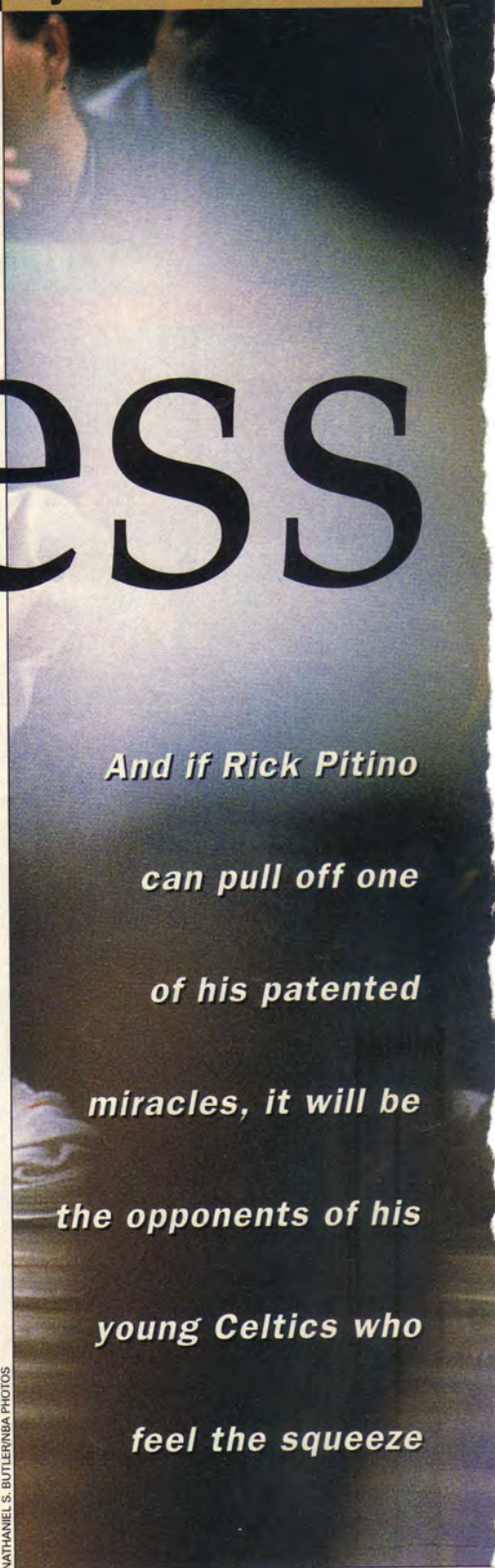
tracks. Everybody wants to catch a glimpse of him."

"Star power," says Celtics guard Dee Brown. "That's what Coach Pitino has. It's not just the Boston Celtics anymore. It's Rick Pitino and the Boston Celtics. *That's* star power."

He is the best thing to happen to the NBA's most storied franchise since Larry Bird's arrival in 1979. Pitino is a costly investment—\$50 million over 10 years—but, Brown says, "He's worth every penny because he's a winner. He wins everywhere he goes, and he'll win here. Guaranteed."

Thus far in his career, Pitino is a perfect four-for-four on reclamation projects: Boston University, Providence College, the New York Knicks, and the University of Kentucky. His players, his staff, and even some of his competitors are certain his 100% success rate will remain intact, that he'll have the Celtics riding deep into the playoffs, probably by next season. "There's no reason to believe otherwise," says forward Antoine Walker, a former Kentucky player who's now the centerpiece of Pitino's pressing, trapping, uptempo system in Boston. "He's like magic."

The second year of each reclamation project is where Pitino and his staff project making the biggest gain. "By then," he says, "the players have been through the system. They know what to expect." However, even though the second year at each stop always has produced the single-largest leap in success, Pitino's impact is always felt immediately, in Year 1. To wit:



NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBA PHOTOS

*And if Rick Pitino
can pull off one
of his patented
miracles, it will be
the opponents of his
young Celtics who
feel the squeeze*

- Boston University wins just 17 games combined in the two years before Pitino arrives. He matches those 17 wins his first season, and gets 21 the second.
- Providence College wins just 11 games the season before Pitino's arrival. He wins 17 his first year and 25 the next, when he