

season—a franchise low that embarrassed everyone—are, at the average age of 23, by far the greenest team in the NBA and have been hammered with double-digit losses numerous times already this season. But anyone who has worked with Pitino, and some who simply observe him from the outside, will tell you that he'll have the Celts winning 50 games and playing in the postseason before you can shout, "Havlicek stole the ball!"

"All of the programs I've taken on have had the same common denominators," Pitino says, sitting in the privacy of his office at the Celtics training facility. "A lack of work ethic, a lack of discipline, a lack of an organized attack. The journey has always been the same, and it will be no different here than it was at BU, Providence, the Knicks, or Kentucky: a lot of pain and disappointment, followed by a lot of promise, followed by a lot of elation."

Aside from a stirring opening-night victory over the Chicago Bulls, the start of the Pitino era has delivered easily as many dis-

appointments as delights, with lopsided losses becoming almost as normal as 60-win seasons were in the Bird years. "On film it's even more painful," Pitino says with a laugh. "But we expected this. It's not a surprise."

He has called the Celtics nothing more than "a talented college basketball team" and has often complained these first few months about the team's inability to comprehend the importance of passing and ball movement. He has singled out his lone star, Walker, claiming to be stunned by how Walker has regressed since the Kentucky days, how he's forgotten he can make everyone on the court better. No player has escaped criticism—constructive, of course.

The Celtics staff has privately projected how many games the team should, or

could, win month by month, based on the progress it expects the players to make in Pitino's pressing-trapping system. January is downright grueling. The Celtics play five sets of back-to-back games in January, and in three of those the second game is against an opponent who had the previous night off. To any coaching staff, let alone one from a team as young and inexperienced as the Celtics, those games are considered virtually automatic defeats.

The staff envisions four winnables in January—home games against the Grizzlies, Timberwolves, Wizards, and Hornets—and six "pushes," games that are winnable depending on the variables. These scenarios are not formally discussed with players, because Pitino insists on "preparing only for today." However, don't think for a second that players don't glance into the future to check out the schedule and determine what games they will be expected to win and what games will give them serious trouble. "We glance," says one Celtic. "Believe me, we do."

February is when Pitino and staff initially felt the team could make its biggest leap, but the schedule sabotages any serious notion of a .500 month. Boston faces an eight-game West Coast trip in which it plays two back-to-backs, and each time its opponent is off the night before. "That sucks," says a player, "but you just deal with it." Of course, the Celtics believe some of those road games—

against the Nuggets, Clippers, Warriors, Kings, and Grizzlies—are winnable simply because those teams aren't that much better than they are. More experienced, yes, but not much better.

Pitino plans to corner NBA commissioner David Stern and point out some perceived scheduling flaws, particularly the Celtics' exhausting six-games-in-nine-nights adventure to open the season. Regardless, though, he, his staff, and his players fully expected, from the outset of this new era, to get embarrassed many times. What is important, says Celtics center Travis Knight, "is forgetting about yesterday, not thinking about tomorrow, and focusing on today."

"That's one of the things that makes Rick special and successful: his ability to focus and prepare for today, not tomorrow,

and not to dwell on yesterday," says Jim O'Brien, a member of Pitino's staff with the Knicks, the Wildcats, and now the Celtics. "He demands excellence on a daily basis. Every day he looks at ways to get those around him to give a little extra. Part of his philosophy is that if you put everything you have into today, tomorrow will take care of itself."

Pitino's first thought upon awakening each morning is the same statement he makes when he steps into the coaches' offices and on the court with his players: "OK, how can we improve today?" He is direct, honest, and sincere, whether he's dealing with a player, an assistant coach, a reporter, or a fan—he looks you straight in the eye, and he never minces words.

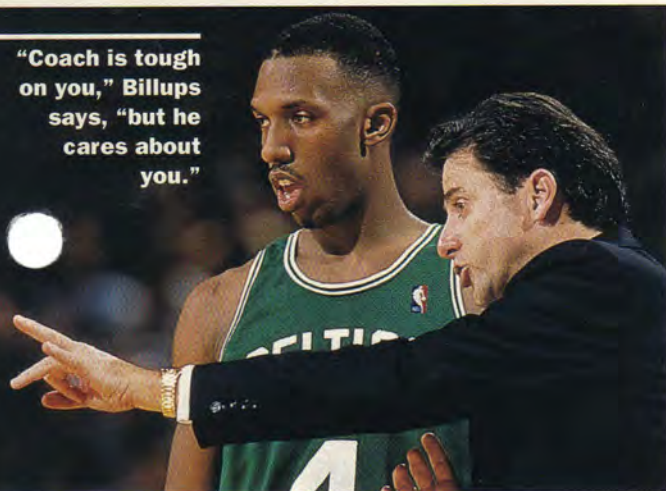
And if he has to criticize a player, he tries to make it positive. "After I had a bad game," says Celtics rookie guard Chauncey Billups, "Coach pulled me aside the next morning and said, 'There's nothing we can do about yesterday, so let's work on today. I believe in you. I believe you can be a great player, but the only way to be a great player is to go out there and improve and show how great you can become.' I felt great after that. Coach is tough on you, but he cares about you. He cares about your feelings. You've got to love that."

When Pitino had a chance to trade forward Chris Mills—just two months after he signed a seven-year, \$34 million free-agent contract—to the Knicks for Walter McCarty, Dontae' Jones, and John Thomas, the coach called the player into his office. "He was totally up-front," Mills says. "He said, 'Chris, we have a chance to trade you to the Knicks for three young players. If you have a problem with it, tell me, and we don't do the deal.' He talked about bringing me in, paying me all kinds of money, and that he felt I was a great addition. But then he said, 'When this situation with the Knicks came up, I saw it as a good thing for both of us. You get to go to a team that can win a championship, and we get three players that we can develop for the future.' When he said that, it made sense. So I said, 'Coach, do the deal.'"

Very direct, very honest. Very Pitino. "Anyway," Mills adds, laughing, "with that choir-boy face and all that charm, how the hell can you say no to him? He's so likable."

That he is. "He has a charisma that few people in the world have," says New Jersey Nets coach John Calipari, a close friend of Celtics general manager Chris Wallace (who, it should be noted, works for Pitino). "He calls him 'the most exciting person I've ever been around.'" McCarty, who played for Pitino at Kentucky and now in Boston

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