

laughs and says: "He is so powerful and convincing that I was told he had players [on his first two Kentucky teams] believing they were good enough to go to the Final Four." Why the laugh? Because Kentucky was on probation those two years and barred from the NCAA Tournament.

Pitino has nonstop energy, boundless enthusiasm, and a relentless work ethic. He gets only 4½ hours of sleep a night. He usually awakens between 4:30 and 5 a.m. and runs six miles, the start of what usually is a 15-hour work day. He is precise and highly organized, and while understanding and sensitive, he is tough and demanding. He expects the people around him to work as hard as he does. "If he's scheduled a meeting for 8," O'Brien says, "he expects you to be there at 7."

"His personality, work mentality, and positive approach rub off on everyone," Knight says. "It's contagious—you really feel it. He gets your blood pumping."

Despite his demanding style, those who know him well say he's a kick to be around. "He can be very funny and entertaining," Brown says. (The veteran read Pitino's book, "Success Is a Choice," and some-

When the Celtics call timeout, it's O'Brien's job to handle the various clipboards containing charts and stats related to the game. During a recent game, O'Brien was trying to hold on to several clipboards when he thought of an ideal play. "Let's hear it," Pitino told him. While fumbling with the clipboards, O'Brien shoved his pencil in his mouth and began talking. The problem, says a player, was that "no one understood him mumbling"—and no one has let him forget it. Now players mumble just to razz O'Brien. Even Pitino has made a crack or two about it.

**P**itino's pressing and trapping system, however, is no joking matter. "It's killer," says Knight, who tried to complete all of Pitino's drills during camp and found himself hooked to an IV for the first time in his life, receiving fluids. Pitino's entire coaching portfolio is based on the style. It's obviously effective for college ball, but the NBA? No way, cynics sniff. Never been done before. "So it's never been done," Walker says. "Big deal. That doesn't mean it *can't* be done. I believe it can. Otherwise, I doubt Coach would be doing it. He's just too smart."

Regardless of what cynics say, Pitino did it with the Knicks, and it worked. There's no doubt in Patrick Ewing's mind that the Pitino system not only can work but can produce an NBA champion. "Hey, we went from 24 wins without it to 38 wins the first year and 50-something the next," says Ewing, who was in his third season with the Knicks when Pitino came aboard. "How can you knock it? Sure, it's tiring, but only if you're not in shape or if you've got bad legs."

The system is based on young, quick, athletic players who are tireless and enthusiastic—"Pitino-style players," Brown likes to call them. McCarty, like teammates Walker and Ron Mercer a veteran of Pitino's style from Kentucky, says: "It's not a complex system if you're Coach Pitino's type of player. You just have to have the mental capability to do what he wants."

Full-court press. Traps. Constant pressure and harassment. Ninety-four feet of continual motion that challenges every dribble and forces turnovers by provoking opponents to play carelessly and recklessly. Total disruption, total chaos.

"It's a hell of an incredible way to play the game," says Shawn Kemp of the Cleveland Cavaliers. "If you're not prepared for it, the Celtics will beat you." Orlando Magic center Rony Seikaly describes the system as "organized playground, helter-skelter." Miami Heat guard Tim Hardaway

predicts that the Celtics "will sneak up on a lot of teams with this system and get some wins. It shocked me."

Pitino always has embraced a frantic pressing-trapping system. Even in high school, as a standout point guard at St. Dominic's in Oyster Bay, Long Island, and later at the University of Massachusetts, he detested slow-paced halfcourt games. "I vowed right then that when I became a coach, I'd never play slow," he says. "To me, it just wasn't fun. I wanted to play a fast, uptempo, exciting game. I wanted to make it exciting for the players, coaches, and fans. I wanted to get the players out in the open court because that's the way every athlete wants to play. That's what every fan wants to see. To me, that's entertainment. It not only brings people out to the arena, but it brings them out of their seats."

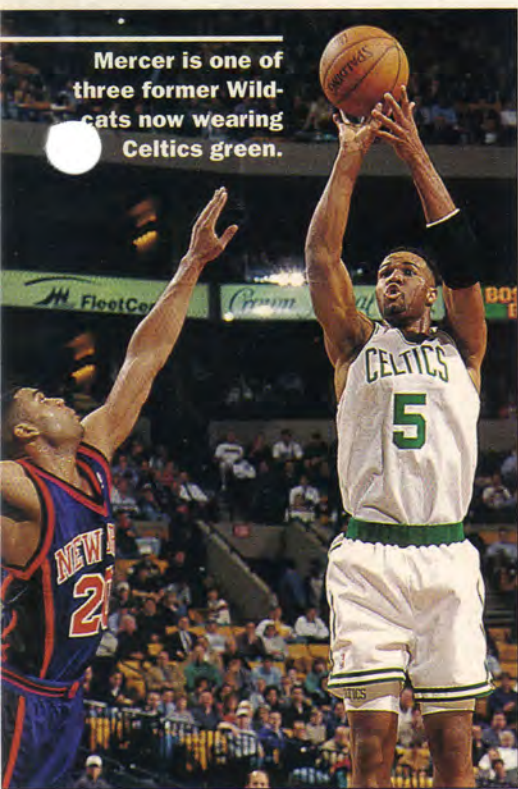
One criticism of the system is that older players can't play in it—that it's designed strictly for the young at heart, players with non-stop energy. Pitino doesn't believe that. "Michael Jordan is 34, and believe me, he can play in this system every second of the day and night, because he's a competitor who plays with great enthusiasm," Pitino says. "There are many older players who can play in this system because they have passion and great enthusiasm. They're not jaded."

"It's the person more than the age that determines who can play in this system. Our mission is to have people who want to play this style of basketball. Sure, the system is a little ugly in the beginning. It's very painful to watch. But then it becomes like the beauty and the beast: It's the beast in the beginning, but you realize how beautiful the beast is in the end."

So far the Celtics players are unanimous in their love for Pitino's system. "Some guys on other teams have come up to me and said, 'Hey, man, I'm jealous. I'd like to play in this system. Looks like a lot of fun,'" Walker says. "I tell them, 'Yeah, it is.'"

It's certainly a lot more fun than the slow, bump-and-grind style increasingly prevalent in the NBA, a style most players detest but many coaches employ simply because it's the surest way to win with constantly changing personnel. That's part of the reason scoring has been down in the league in recent years. The Bulls led the league in scoring last season with 103.1 points per game, which is a staggering 13.6 fewer points than the Knicks averaged under Pitino in 1988-89.

"There's no question that today's players love the uptempo, fast-paced style," Kemp says. "It's exciting. It gets you going. To me, the only thing wrong with it is that not



Mercer is one of three former Wildcats now wearing Celtics green.

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times catches the coach off-guard by quoting a line from it.) "He's very, very intense and serious, but to break up the seriousness, he'll rip off a great line or joke and just crack everyone up."

A popular joke this season, O'Brien admits, is one that "busts my stones."