

...through teams are using it."

The Celtics hope their commitment to a pressuring, fastbreaking game will attract top-shelf free agents to Boston in the next couple of seasons. Like most executives and the league, Pitino—who believes an NBA team needs three stars to win a title—has a shopping list of potential free agents and is making mental notes as to who would best fit in his system. Toronto Raptors point guard Damon Stoudamire and Golden State Warriors forward Joe Smith, the plums of next summer's free-agent class (if Phoenix Suns power forward Antonio McDyess re-signs as expected), may be the apples of Pitino's eye. The Philadelphia 76ers' Jerry Stackhouse, who can play the two and three spots, is also on the short list; the Celtics love his athleticism and energy.

Pitino and Wallace also have evaluated the '99 free-agent class, which includes Vancouver Grizzlies forward Shareef Abdur-Rahim, 76ers point guard Allen Iverson, Minnesota Timberwolves point guard Stephon Marbury, and Raptors forward Marcus Camby. If one of these players hits the open market, look out—the Celtics will swoop right in.

Don't think for a second that some of the league's hot young free agents-to-be haven't thought about squeezing their way into Pitino's wide-open system and putting some of the fun back in their lives for 48 minutes a night about 100 times a year. "I've spoken to a couple of my clients about it," says one agent. "Boston is a place that is becoming more and more attractive because of Rick Pitino and his style of play."

For this season, the Celtics' primary concern is scoring, which is suffering under the dual burdens of youth and impatience. "It may kill us for most of the first half," says veteran pivotman Pervis Ellison. "We're just too young a team that hasn't been together long enough to produce the kind of offense that it takes to win on a consistent basis."

Pitino's offensive philosophy is based on passing, passing, and more passing. It's movement, making the extra pass, hitting the open man. It's penetrating, drawing a double-team, and kicking it back out for a three. It's cutting, slicing, driving, dishing. These are all things the Celtics can't do very well right now. But Pitino and his staff, and even the players, expect to have some of the kinks worked out before the All-Star break in early February.

"I'm a big part of the reason we're suffering offensively," Walker says. "The players

are looking to me, and I'm just trying to do too much. I'm not passing enough and I'm shooting too much—I'm not passing when it's there, and I'm shooting when the shot isn't there. We're just so young that I've got it locked in that I have to carry the scoring burden."

Pitino's style starts with passing, which is why he is so startled by the Celtics' lack of passing fundamentals and execution. "The players," he says, "simply don't understand yet—and I emphasize *yet*—that when we start focusing more on passing instead of scoring, we'll score more and our shooting percentage will increase." After games against the Knicks and Heat, Pitino drove home the point time and time again how those teams "put on a clinic in making the extra pass out of the post, getting wide-open shots. Making that one extra pass forces better player and ball movement, and it forces defenses to move, creating offensive rebounds. Making that extra pass is essential to winning. Absolutely essential."

The key piece in Boston's puzzle is Knight, who was signed to a seven-year, \$22 million contract after earning the minimum salary as a rookie last season with the Los Angeles Lakers. Just 23, Knight is a skilled big man who can drill threes and block shots, and is equipped with a huge heart, smarts, and a great work ethic. Seven-footers aren't easy to find, but leave it to Pitino to grab a youngster with a tremendous upside. "Worth every penny," Pitino says of Knight's surprisingly high income. "You'll see."

The working day is almost over for most Bostonians. The traffic is building on routes 95 and 128 and on Storrow Drive, and the Red and Green trolley lines are getting crowded. For Pitino, though, the day is just half-over. There's much more work to be done: more preparation for the next opponent, more film to study, more charts to analyze.

"You know," he says, swinging his chair sideways, "I've asked myself, 'Why the heck are you here? You could be at Kentucky winning 30 games with a national-championship caliber team. What is it that makes you want to take on these



Walker—big, fast, and agile—is ideal for Pitino's pressing, running game.

incredible challenges that keep you awake at night? Then after I finally doze off and wake up the next morning, I'm so excited that I can't wait to get started, to cure all of the problems facing the team. I've realized that all the challenges are keeping me forever young. They keep putting me in a position to strive to new heights, to take a team where it has never gone before or where it hasn't been for a long time. That's refreshing, rewarding.

"Sure, this season has been trying and it's going to be that way until April, until the 82nd game. There will be nights I wish I was back in Kentucky, nights I wish I had more talent—there already have been—and there will be nights I wish we could get better quicker."

He's been in this position before; he's traveled down this same road four times. Yet he relishes the journey because of what he expects to find at the end of it. ■