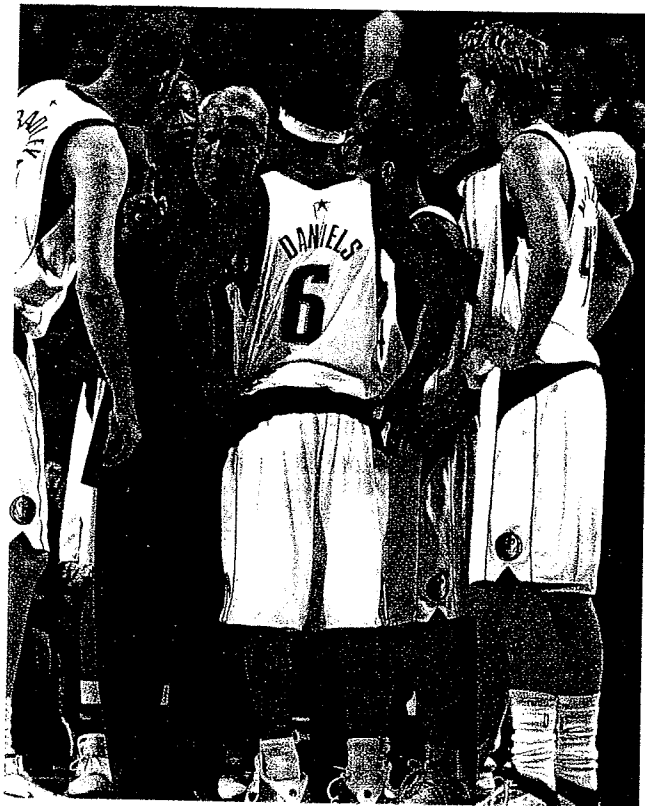


Inside The NBA

by Ian Thomsen



Whoa, Nellie?

In a characteristically unconventional move, Don Nelson resigned from the Mavs, hastening their rebuilding plan

DON NELSON reaffirmed his reputation as one of the league's most unpredictable coaches by taking himself out of the game. "I noticed some slippage," says the 64-year-old Nelson, referring not only to the Mavericks' recent play but also to his passion after 42 years as an NBA player, coach and executive. So he met last Saturday with team owner Mark Cuban, who agreed to pay him next season's \$5.1 million salary, then keep him on as a consultant through 2011. At the Mavs' shootaround two hours later, the league's second-winningest coach

(1,190 to Lenny Wilkens's 1,332) ceremoniously handed his whistle to coaching newcomer Avery Johnson (9-4 while subbing for Nellie earlier this season).

As a result of Nelson's team-first move, Dallas—health permitting—should become a more viable title contender over the next two seasons. The players' offensive creativity, developed during Nelson's eight-year reign, will now be married to the defensive principles of the fiery Johnson, 40, the former guard who retired last September to become Nelson's lead assistant and heir.

The move fits with Cuban's



TEX MIX Even as Nelson led the team, he was grooming Johnson (above) to be his successor.

larger plan to, as he puts it, "change the culture" of the Mavs from an entertaining shoot-first bunch to one that plays postseason-style D while demanding MVP-caliber play from 7-foot forward Dirk Nowitzki. Should sixth man Jerry Stackhouse (slightly torn right groin) and center Erick Dampier (right foot stress fracture) return in April, Dallas could even challenge the Spurs and the Suns in the playoffs this spring. At week's end the Mavericks had yielded an average of 100.7 points in 17 games without the 6' 11" Dampier and 97.0 when he has protected the rim. "There are a number of areas that I am not pleased with," said a stern Johnson, after a 104-93 win over the visiting Bobcats last Saturday. Defense is at the top of that list.

Johnson's inexperience will be tempered by having longtime assistants Del Harris, Charlie Parker and Larry Riley, and his transition will be aided by the fact that the players already viewed

him as their future coach. Despite their injuries, Nelson's missing games for rotator cuff surgery and the free-agent defection of MVP candidate Steve Nash to Phoenix, the Mavs (43-22) were still two games ahead of last year's pace.

Recognizing that so much depends on Nowitzki, Johnson immediately met with the 26-year-old, who through Sunday was averaging career highs in almost every category while ranking third overall in scoring (26.5 points per game), ninth in rebounds (10.1) and fifth in free throw attempts (9.3)—a stunning 69% gain over last season in the stat that best measures aggressive play. "Nowitzki's elevated play has kept them right in the hunt," says Rockets coach Jeff Van Gundy. "He's having an unbelievable year."

Nowitzki appears eager to heed Johnson's advice, especially when it comes to improving his defense and leadership skills. Johnson, after all, was the point guard in San Antonio when Tim Duncan evolved from a quiet lieutenant into an inspirational figure—a transformation that seems well within Nowitzki's reach. "I want to get my teammates involved more and more, and I think that's something that comes with experience," says Nowitzki. "I just don't make my team better, or as good as I want it to be. It's sometimes getting two or three blocks down the stretch or getting a deflection and making a steal. Like a Tim Duncan: Maybe in one, two, three years, I'll be right there where he is." □

Scout's Take

On the Cavaliers' decision on Monday to replace coach Paul Silas, who had two years left on his contract, with assistant Brendan Malone:

"Silas is a proven winner, but he's not a details coach—he runs a simple offense, and the execution isn't precise. That caught up with them during their nine-game losing streak on the road, where details matter the most. He also didn't have a college coach on his staff, which is a mistake in this era of young, unschooled players like LeBron James. On the other hand, Silas is the sixth coach to be let go this season, which makes you wonder about teams' investing millions in these guys and then firing them after a short period of losing. I can't imagine the owners running their other businesses as recklessly as they run their teams."

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Whoa Nellie

1. How old is Don Nelson?
A.) 64 B.) 50 C.) 61 D.) 65
2. What is Don Nelson's salary for next year?
A.) 4.5 million B.) 5.1 million C.) 6.0 million D.) 3.5 million
3. How many wins does Nelson have as a coach?
A.) 1332 B.) 1223 C.) 1190 D.) 1040
4. Who is taking over for Nelson?
A.) Larry Brown B.) Avery Johnson C.) Del Harris
5. Avery Johnson will teach defense over offense.
A.) True B.) False
6. What kind of surgery did Nelson have this year?
A.) knee B.) wrist C.) ankle D.) rotator cuff
7. Who is the Assistant Coach for Dallas?
A.) Del Harris B.) Charlie Parker C.) Larry Riley D.) all
8. Who is the best player on the Dallas team?
A.) Erik Dampier B.) Steve Nash C.) Dirk Nowitzki D.) Jerry Stackhouse
9. Who replaced Paul Silas as coach of the Cavaliers?
A.) Brendan Malone B.) Tim Duncan C.) Avery Johnson D.) Don Nelson
10. How many points per game does Dallas give up?
A.) 97.7 B.) 100.7 C.) 92.3 D.) 95.8