

Larry Brown is incredulous.

He knows the league standings, and he knows his team, Detroit, is looking up—way up, *six games up*—at the Pacers, who hold the NBA's best overall record, and the best road record. Then, Brown channels the recent past to point out that, "We have not beaten Indiana even once all year."

Indeed, he is right: At the time—before the Pistons won their last meeting in the regular season—it was Indiana 3, Pistons 0. Even if you somehow discount the Pacers, Brown continues, there's still the matter of the two-time reigning East champs, the Nets. "And New Jersey swept us in the playoffs last year," Brown says. "It was not even close." Listen to Brown long enough, and you'll come away surprised the Pistons have the talent to tie their shoes before games.

As long as the Nets and Pacers are around, Brown makes it clear that he has not penciled the Pistons into the role of Eastern Conference favorites. "It's just not an appropriate thing to say," Brown says.

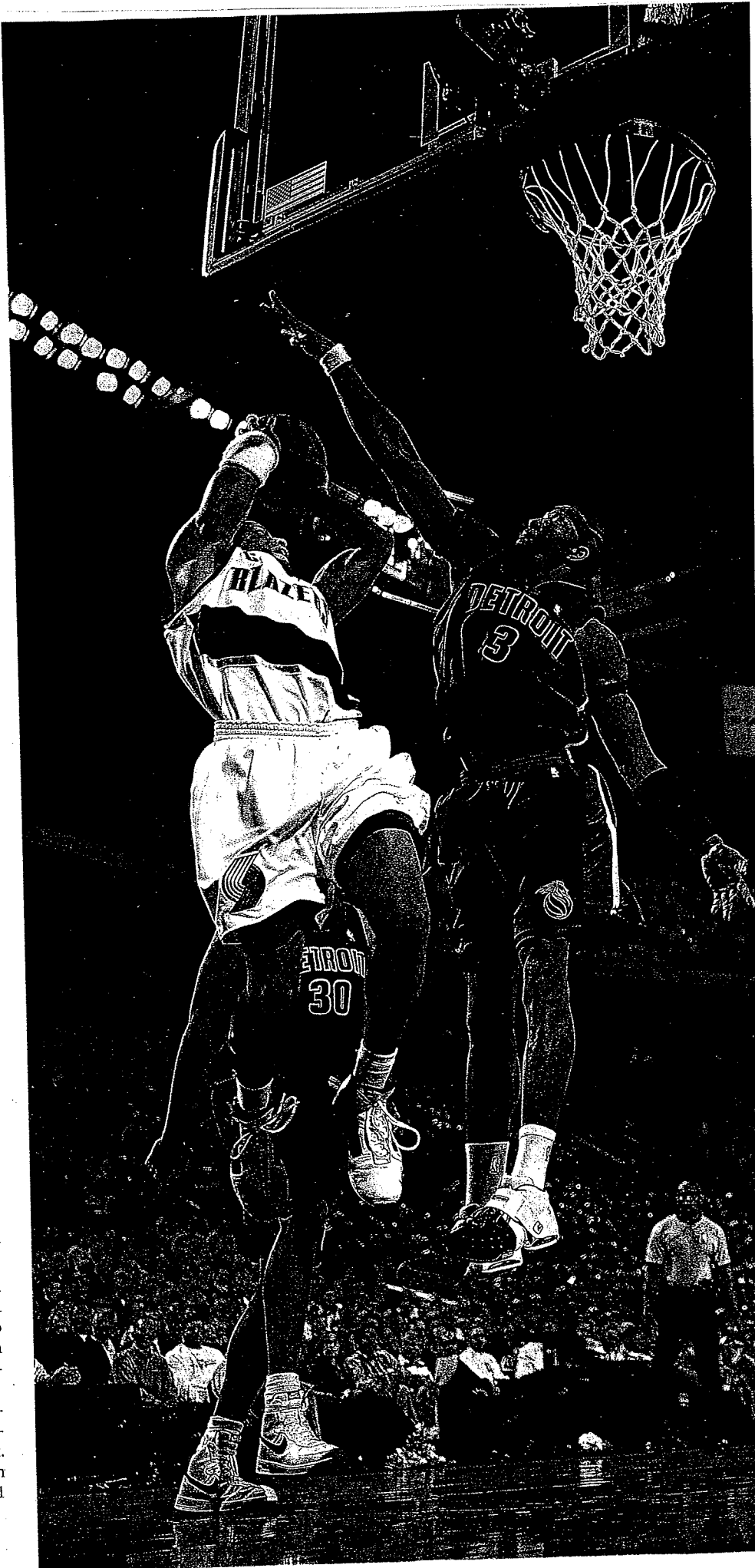
Yet, impartial observers are finding that claim to be plenty appropriate. Overall records aside, the Pistons are coming off the most dominant winning streak in league history, fueled by their February acquisition of forward Rasheed Wallace. Consider what the Pistons accomplished in March: Eight straight games won by 15 or more points, a league first; five consecutive games holding opponents below 70 points, another first; a boost in their season total of holding teams below 70 points to nine. (They've since made it 10; the old record was six.) For good measure, there was this bit of box score absurdity: In their 97-66 victory over Denver on March 6, the Pistons became the first team in the shot clock era to hold every opposing player to single-digit scoring.

That's indicative of the Pistons' transformation. When Brown frets about stacking up against Indiana and New Jersey, he is using the old Pistons, a talented team that was sometimes soft and always streaky, for his comparisons. But since trading for Wallace, they are a consistent, ferocious bunch that is capable on offense and defends with claws and fangs bared. They allowed just 78.2 points per game in the first 21 games after Wallace arrived. There are believers, even if Brown is not one of them. After Denver's debacle, for example, Nuggets guard Jon Barry said (no doubt making Brown cringe), "I think Detroit is the favorite in the East."

Brown might get queasy upon hearing this from an Eastern Conference scout: "They have everything now. Solid guard play, an incredible frontcourt, plus a good bench. It's hard to imagine a team, certainly any team in the East, beating them four out of seven."

And don't let Brown hear Cavaliers coach Paul Silas. After a drubbing by the Pistons, Silas declared to reporters, "They are probably one of the top two teams in the league." Then, he added, as if to push Brown into a full-blown conniption, "Detroit is better than Indiana now, no doubt in my mind."

That's because, though the Pacers have stud forwards Jermaine O'Neal and Ron Artest, the frontcourt the Pistons trot out is even more dominant. There's two-time Defensive Player of the Year Ben Wallace at center, Rasheed Wallace (who stands 6-11



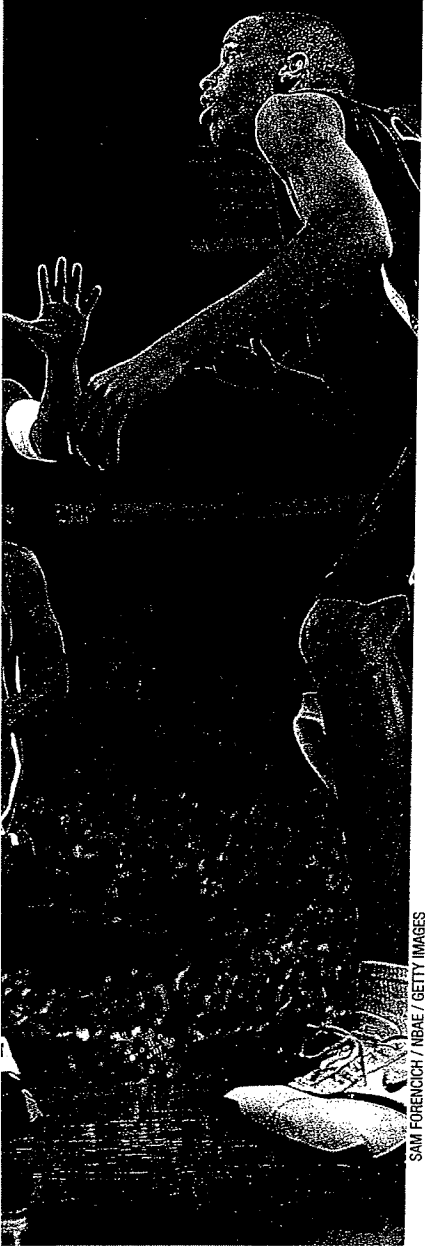
TIME OUTS RE...

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worthy

The Pistons are emerging as the best team in the East—and just might be good enough to knock out a heavyweight from the West. Just don't let Larry Brown hear you say it. BY SEAN DEVENEY

Challenge



SAM FORENCH / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES

with a 7-4 wingspan) at power forward and Tayshaun Prince (6-9, with a 7-2 wingspan) at small forward. That's a group of big men who can cover a lot of ground, a trio with size and talent equal to—or, perhaps even exceeding—the top teams in the West. And, let there be no doubt, it's size that wins in the postseason.

The way the Pistons have played in the past month, says team president Joe Dumars, is almost surreal. "Whenever you are putting a team together, you envision how you'd like to see your team play," he says. "It is awfully hard to get your vision and the way you play to be the same thing. Since Rasheed has come over, that vision and the actual play have collided."

But, eight victories in a row by at least 15 points? Five games in a row allowing fewer than 70 points? A spot among the Eastern Conference favorites—or perhaps, *the* spot, alone—no matter what Brown thinks? Must have been some vision Dumars had.

"Even with your vision you don't think that," Dumars says, chuckling. "I did not envision that."

There are no second acts in American life, F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, but ol' Fitzzy apparently never got a load of Rasheed Wallace. Wallace, now in his ninth year in the NBA, is somewhere around Act IV or V.

This time, Wallace has been incarnated as the Pistons' savior, the exact piece the team needed in terms of on-floor ability and overall attitude. Wallace always has been fiery, but it was during coach Mike Dunleavy's tenure in Portland that Wallace cemented his reputation as combustible to the point of hurting his team. Wallace's 41 technical fouls in 2000-01 shattered the league record, frustrated Dunleavy and began a downward trend in which both Wallace and the Blazers became league pariahs. Yet Dunleavy, now coaching the Clippers, says that when he heard the Pistons were trading for Wallace, "I thought it was a terrific, terrific move. I am not surprised by the way he fits in.

"He gives them what they need both offensively and defensively. He can give them a low-post game offensively, a guy to go against anybody in the league in the post. He's 6-11 and has an outside game, a pick-and-roll game that goes all the way to the

3-point line, and that is quite an asset. Defensively, he is so long and quick, you can do whatever you want with him. He can get out and press, blocks shots, defends the pick-and-roll."

The Pistons had talent before acquiring Wallace. Most of the offense came from Chauncey Billups and Richard Hamilton on the perimeter, with post men such as Mehmet Okur and Corliss Williamson providing help. The defense funneled toward Ben Wallace, who erased mistakes with his shot-blocking. But there were problems. Perimeter scoring is unreliable, and when Billups and Hamilton shot poorly, the Pistons slumped. And Detroit missed the defense of Clifford Robinson, traded to Golden State in the offseason. Robinson could shut down big men in the post and was athletic enough to pop out for trapping help on pick-and-rolls. Okur is a center and does not move well enough to help in the high post—but moving Ben Wallace out there would limit his shot-blocking.

With one trade, the Pistons addressed needs on both ends. They got scoring help for Hamilton and Billups (who averaged 5.1 assists before Rasheed Wallace arrived but 7.2 since). Plus, Rasheed Wallace's athleticism and length allows Ben Wallace to focus on help defense under the basket. Rasheed also adds grit to what was a mild-mannered team of good guys. Billups points out that, when Wallace is on the floor, the Pistons take on his aggressive personality. "It trickles to everyone," he says. Center Elden Campbell points out that Wallace might have been a "knucklehead," in the past, but, "We need that."

Dumars has known Wallace for a long time. He says he knew Wallace was not "the monster he sometimes is portrayed as." But even if he were, the Pistons have one of the most positive locker rooms in the league, and Dumars says he trusted the environment in Detroit to assuage problems with Wallace. Besides, he liked Wallace's edge, his knuckleheadedness.

"I knew he was not a terrible guy," Dumars says. "I also knew the warts. I knew this guy could blow up; I knew he could have a short fuse, but in a weird kind of way, I thought that could be an attribute for us. Because we have such good guys, who rarely let their fuses blow."

Now, the Pistons have some devilish swagger

WORTH CHALLENGER

1. TRUE OR FALSE DETROIT WON 8 STRAIGHT GAMES BY 15 POINTS OR MORE.
2. HOW MANY TIMES HAS DETROIT HELD TEAMS BELOW 70 POINTS?
3. WHO IS THE COACH FOR THE PISTONS?
4. HOW TALL IS TAYSHAUN PRINCE?
5. WHO IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE PISTONS?
6. HOW MANY TECHNICAL FOULS DID WALLACE HAVE IN 2000-2001?
7. WHO WAS WALLACE'S COACH IN 2000-2001?
8. HOW TALL IS RASHEED WALLACE?
9. WHO IS THE BEST SHOT BLOCKER ON THE PISTONS?
10. TRUE OR FALSE DETROIT IS THE BEST TEAM IN THE WESTERN CONFERENCE.