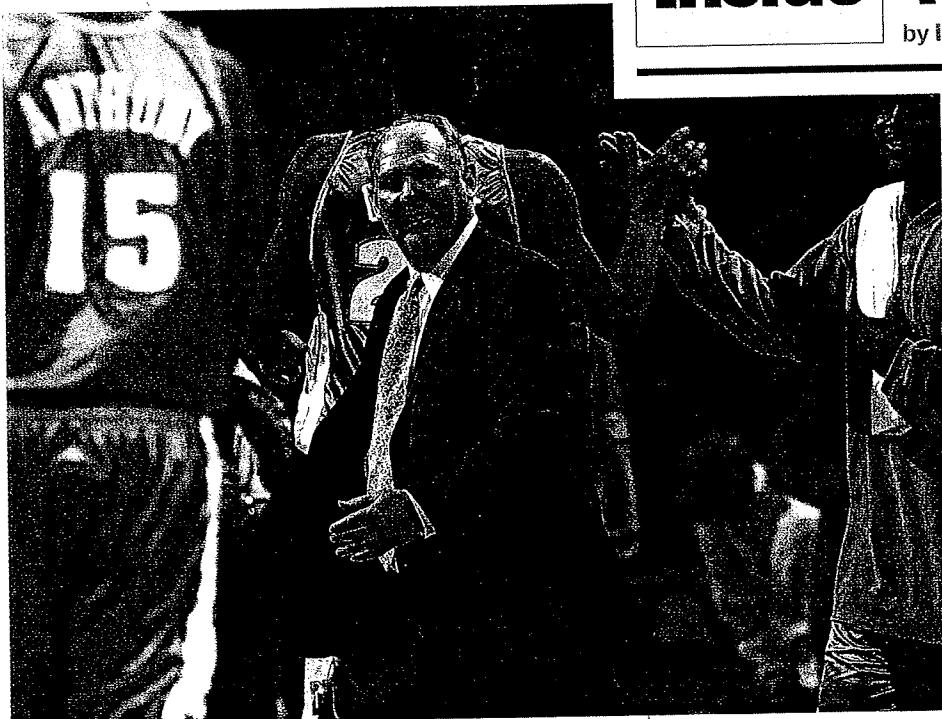


by Ian Thomsen



Mr. Fix-it

Intense? Sure. Controversial? You bet. But to the Nuggets, George Karl was the best hope for salvaging the season

GEORGE KARL is the NBA's version of Billy Martin. Karl's ego and intensity have created conflicts—whether with the Sonics' front office or in the locker room of his last team, the Bucks—but among current coaches with at least eight years of experience, only Gregg Popovich (.653 through Sunday), Jerry Sloan (.620) and Rick Adelman (.616) have a better winning percentage than the .587 Karl earned with four teams over 16 seasons. The controversy surrounding Karl is what led Nuggets G.M. Kiki Vandeweghe, after firing Jeff Bzdelik on Dec. 28, to first explore bringing in a less abrasive coach, such as assistants Phil Johnson of the Jazz or the Mavericks' Del Harris.

So why did Vandeweghe decide last Thursday to sign Karl to a three-year, \$9 million contract

that includes an option for three more years? Contrary to league-wide rumors, team owner Stan Kroenke didn't order Vandeweghe to make the move. NBA sources say that the two reached an understanding: If a superior coach couldn't be found, then Vandeweghe would hire Karl ASAP in hopes of salvaging the season for Denver (19–25 at week's end).

Kroenke did not return calls from SI, but sources familiar with his thinking say that his championship experiences as principal owner of the NHL's Colorado Avalanche and minority owner of the NFL's St. Louis Rams taught him that the hardest part of the Nuggets' climb is still ahead. And tightening the screws and demanding more is Karl's specialty. "George clearly was the best coach, and I told Stan that," says Vandeweghe. "I tried to track

TAKING THE FIFTH The 53-year-old Karl started with a pair of wins at NBA stop No. 4.

down some of his negative publicity and what was behind it, and I didn't think in many cases that it was warranted."

These Nuggets are ripe for improvement under Karl: At both ends they feel more comfortable in the paint than on the perimeter, and they have plenty of upside. "We have good individual defenders but not good team defenders," says Karl, who may explore starting 5' 5" Earl Boykins

at the point and shifting Andre Miller to shooting guard to speed up the transition game. In Karl's debut last Friday at Milwaukee, the Nuggets listened attentively in the huddle while going on a 38–20 fourth quarter run in a 106–100 victory. The following night Denver prevailed 95–88 at Indiana, giving the team two road wins after a 5–16 start away from home. "He told us before the game, 'Once we get our confidence, it will be hard for anyone to beat us,'" says star forward Carmelo Anthony. "Our confidence is way up."

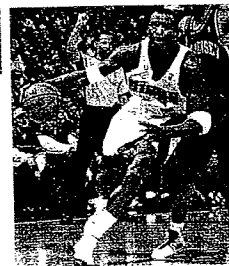
Now Karl has more job security than Vandeweghe, who has next season remaining on a five-year, \$3.8 million deal. Count on two changes: Karl will preach a win-now philosophy when the Nuggets decide how to draft this spring, and he'll ask Vandeweghe to give up the private workouts he conducts with Anthony and other players. "I love Kiki's input, and if he wants to go into the gym with me and my assistants there, then no problem," Karl says. "But there's a protocol between the coaches and the players."

Yet Karl vows that he and his G.M. will find that common ground. "I need Kiki, and Kiki needs me," says Karl. "I need him to make good decisions, and he needs me to coach my ass off." □

Scout's Take

On **Cuttino Mobley**, who joined the Kings in a Jan. 10 swap of shooting guards that sent Doug Christie to the Magic:

"He had a bad reputation because he got lumped in with Steve Francis: People saw them as the same player, even though Francis isn't as good a one-on-one defender as Mobley. The question is whether Mobley can adapt to Sacramento's style of moving the ball; he's known as a guy who pounds the ball and holds on to it. From what I've seen, he's trying to conform and prove people wrong, like Rasheed Wallace did when he moved to Detroit last season. I bet the Kings win five or six more games with this pickup, proving once again that G.M. Geoff Petrie is very, very good: He gave up a 34-year-old in decline for a 29-year-old who may not have peaked."



Mr. Fix-It

1. What coach had the highest winning percentage in the NBA?
A.) Popovich B.) Brown C.) Karl D.) Sloan

2. What is George Karl's winning Percentage?
A.) 620 B.) 653 C.) 587 D.) 550

3. Who is the Denver Coach that was recently fired?
A.) Karl B.) Mobley C.) Bzdelik D.) Harris

4. Who is the new Denver coach?
A.) Harris B.) Karl C.) Johnson D.) Kroenke

5. How many years left on Kiki Vanderwegar's contract?
A.) 1 B.) 5 C.) 3 D.) 4

6. What was the score of the first game Karl coached with Denver?
A.) 38-20 B.) 95-88 C.) 100-88 D.) 106-100

7. Who is the owner of the Nuggets?
A.) Karl B.) Harris C.) Smith D.) Kroenke

8. What is the age of George Karl?
A.) 53 B.) 43 C.) 50 D.) 49

9. Cuttino Mobley was traded to the Kings for which player?
A.) Harris B.) Christie C.) Karl D.) Johnson

10. George Karl has never coached in the NBA until now?
A.) true B.) False