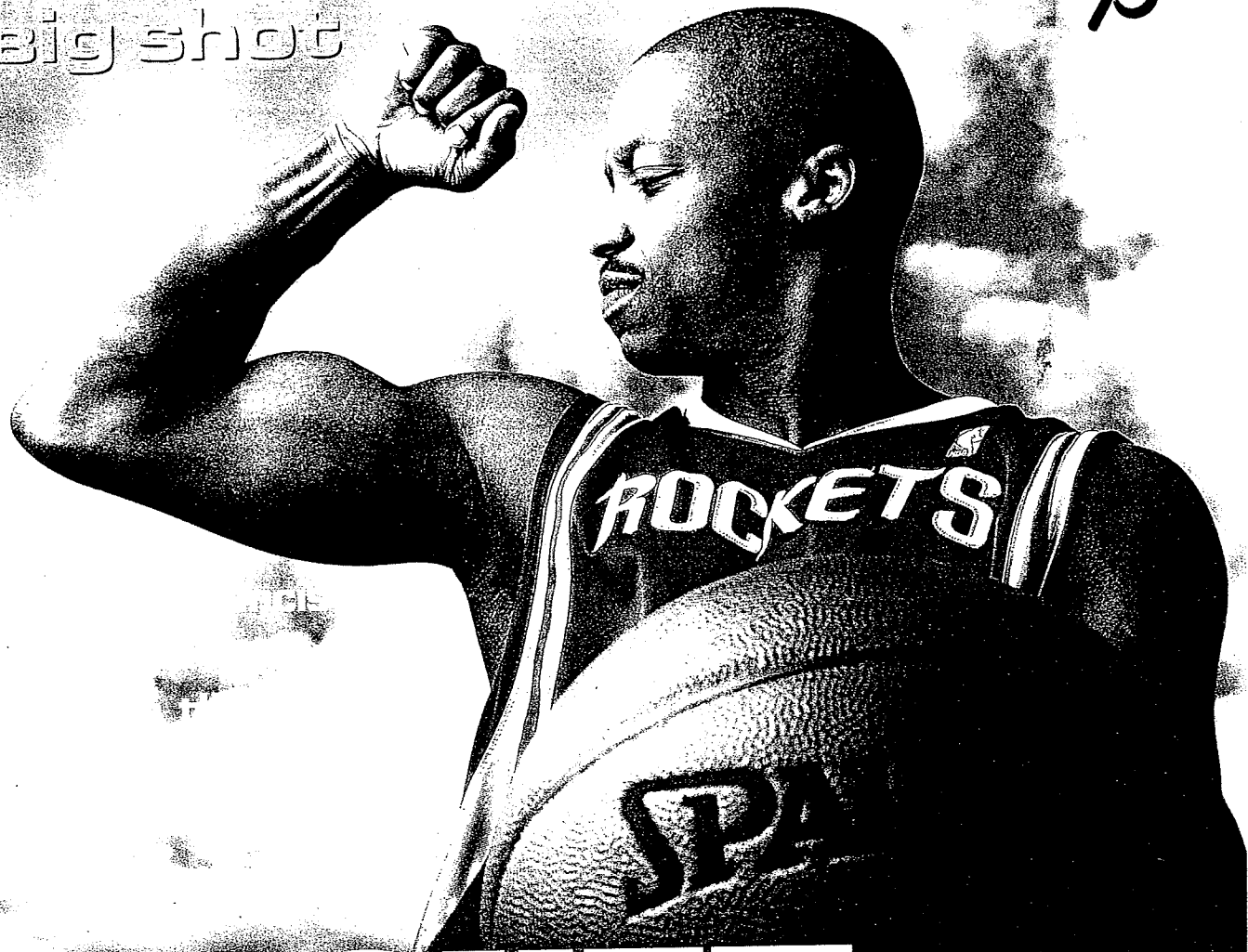


Big shot

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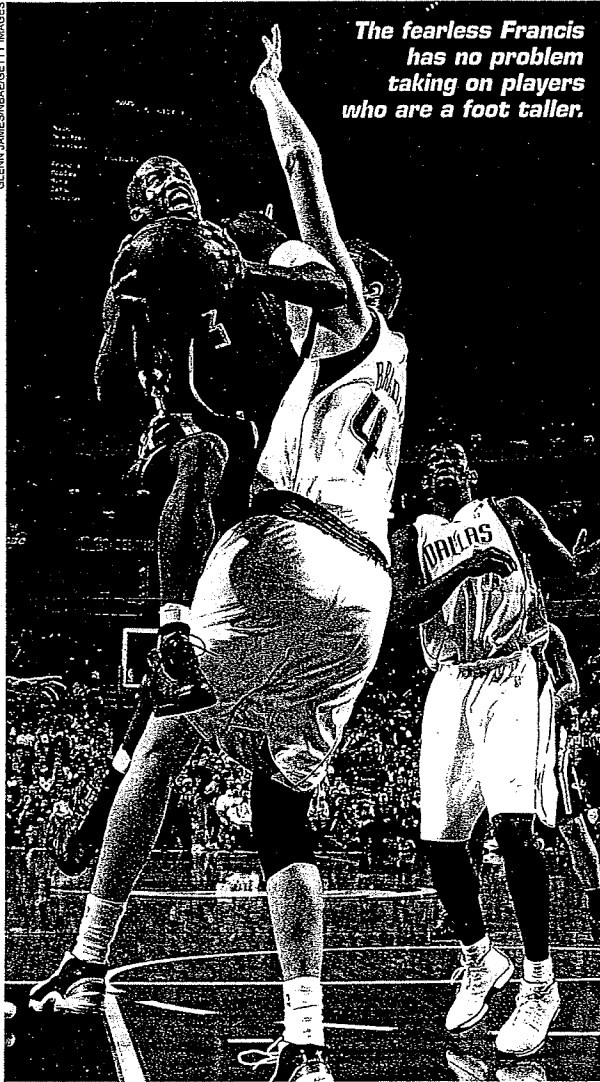
ROCKET POWER

by Ted Keith

Steve Francis is running late. He emerges from the Houston Rockets' locker room in the Toyota Center dressed in his team's red uniform and heads to a photo shoot across the street. Instead of rushing, though, Francis makes stops along the way.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT SEALE

GLENN JAMES/GETTY IMAGES



The fearless Francis has no problem taking on players who are a foot taller.

He pops into the Rockets' offices, checking each room to see if he can say hello to anyone, surprising some employees. He checks the playing floor and jokingly yells to an innocent bystander, "Hey, get off the court!"

His three-minute walk to the photo shoot turns into a 10-minute journey, but Francis finally arrives at his destination. Nothing new here. Francis's journey to NBA stardom has been filled with detours too. "It's remarkable," he says of his road to the pros. "I've got to tell you: Determination made me what I am right now."

Tiny and Tough

Francis grew up in a poor, crime-ridden part of Takoma Park, Maryland, less than half an hour from Washington D.C. "It is a place where you never know if you are going to

make it out," says former Rocket guard Moochie Norris, who grew up in the area.

When young Steve was shooting on one of the many basketball courts in the area, his mother, Brenda, and older brothers Terry and Jeff kept a close watch on him.

"My brothers pretty much smacked me in the head and said either go to the basketball court or go in the house," says Francis.

When Francis was 9, a friend took him to the local Boys & Girls Club to play hoops. He was wearing jeans and school shoes because he could not afford sneakers. But he put on such a show that Tony Langley, the club's basketball coach, invited him back.

Soon, Francis was spending up to six hours each day after school playing hoops at the club. Says Langley, "He had a fierce desire to be the best."

Despite his will to succeed, Francis didn't have the body of a

hoops player. "He was tiny," says his brother Terry.

Standing just 5' 3" as a sophomore, Francis was too small to make much of an impact on his Blair High School team. He didn't play his freshman year because his grades weren't good enough. He started just one game as a sophomore, when he was mainly the third-string point guard. He missed his entire junior season because of a broken ankle.

Then, in his senior year, tragedy struck. His mom died of cancer at age 39. The normally upbeat, happy-go-lucky Francis was crushed. He stopped studying. His grades slipped. He dropped out of school. "He basically stopped living his life," says Terry.

Getting It Together

The following fall, a family friend steered Francis to a prep school in Connecticut to finish high school. But a grant fell through and Francis's family couldn't afford the tuition. Francis had to leave the school after a couple of months. He arrived back in Takoma Park in November 1995. At age 18, Francis had played only one season of high school ball. But he still dreamed of playing in the NBA. "That's what I wanted to do," he says. "I always wanted to be a professional basketball player."

Instead of giving up, he spent the next few months playing pickup games in the basement of a firehouse and working toward earning his high school equivalency diploma. His crossover dribble became so quick and smooth that a defender literally broke his ankle one time trying to

"Determination is what made me what I am right now,"

says Francis.

defend Francis. He had grown a foot since his sophomore year. He stood 6' 3" and had a 43-inch vertical leap, and his game was turning heads in local pickup games. "Even when I was short, I could always jump," he says.

In the summer of 1996, Francis got the break he needed. He played on a Maryland AAU team and made the all-tournament team in the 19-and-under AAU national championships. He also earned his high-school equivalency diploma. A coach for San Jacinto Junior College, in Pasadena, Texas, saw him play and offered him a scholarship. Francis led San Jacinto to the Juco national championship game that season. But he transferred to Allegany (Maryland) Community College, which was only three hours from his home, after one year.

"I left because I was homesick," says Francis.

At Allegany, Francis's game continued to flourish. He lit up opponents for 25.3 points and 8.7 assists per game in his sophomore season and earned a scholarship to Maryland for 1998-99.

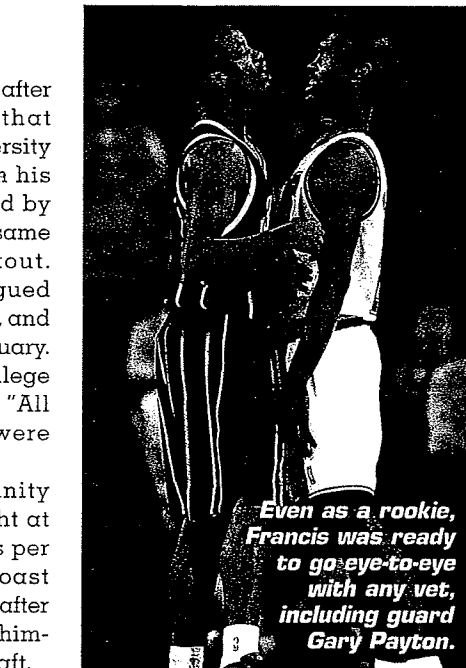
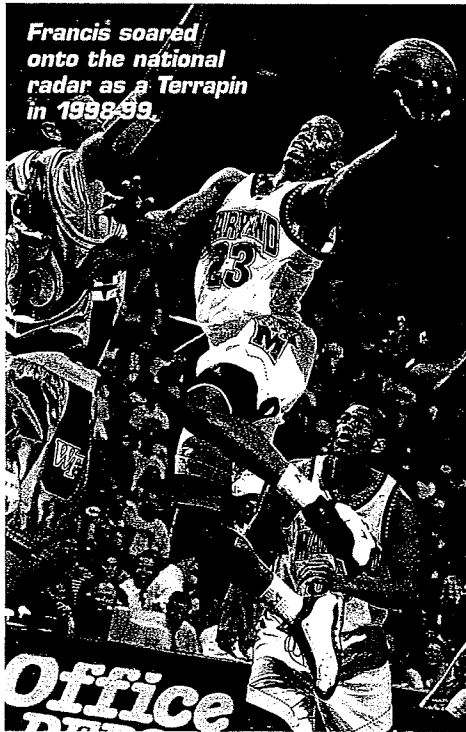
Time to Shine

Francis thought about going pro after junior college. But he felt that playing for a well-known university like Maryland would give him his best chance of getting noticed by NBA scouts. He was right. That same season, the NBA had a lockout. Players and management argued over money and contract issues, and no games were played until January. With pro games on the shelf, college hoops took center stage on TV. "All the NBA players and scouts were watching them," says Francis.

Francis seized the opportunity and shined under the spotlight at Maryland. He scored 17 points per game and had an Atlantic Coast Conference-best 2.8 steals. Soon after the season ended, he declared himself eligible for the 1999 NBA Draft.

Taking Control

The Vancouver Grizzlies chose Francis with the second overall pick in the draft. But Vancouver already had a rising star at point guard: Mike Bibby. Francis knew the Grizzlies wanted him to switch to shooting guard, a position he



FRANCIS'S FAVORITE STUFF

Sports to Watch	Football
Sport to Play	Pool
Video Game	James Bond 007
TV Show	The Bernie Mac Show
Movie	Poetic Justice
Food	Lasagna
Actor	Samuel L. Jackson
Actress	Halle Berry
Musical Group	New Edition (back in the 1980's)
Vacation Spot	Bermuda
Athlete	Marion Jones
Teams to Watch	Maryland Terps, Dallas Cowboys
Cereal	Golden Grahams

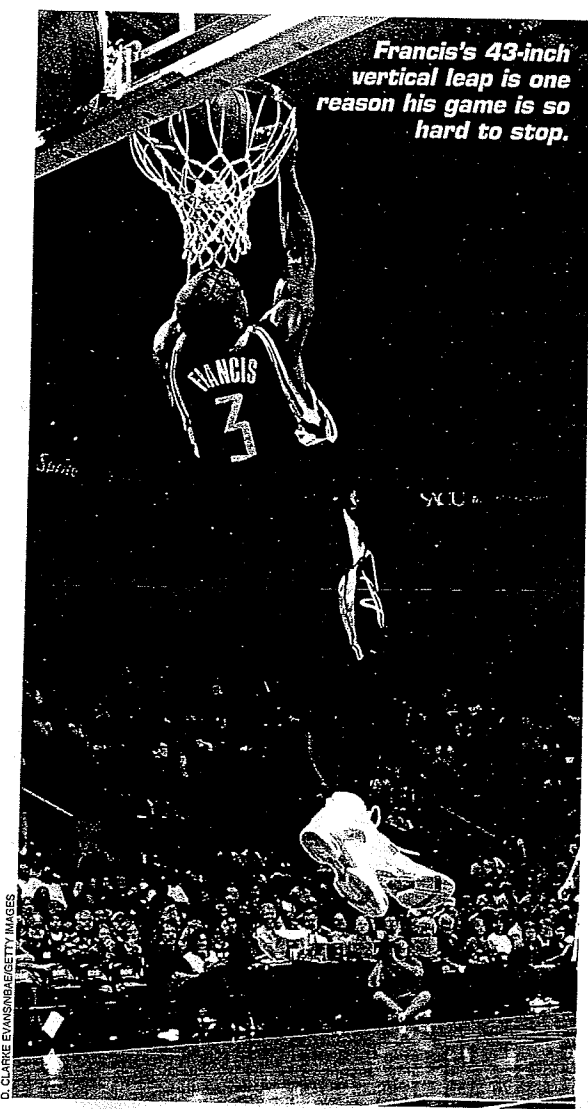


DAVE PIZZO/SKI

MANNI MILLAN/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

JOHN W. MOON/OLYMPIC/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

JAMES BOND 007 COURTESY OF EA GAMES; BERNIE MAC BY PAPA; GARY PAYTON, FRANCIS, AND YAO MING COURTESY OF EA GAMES; LASAGNA COURTESY OF PIZZERIA COLLECTOR; JONES BY CHRISTOPHER SIMON/EVERETT COLLECTION; MARYLAND TERPS BY GARY W. HANCOCK/EVERETT COLLECTION; GOLDEN GRAHAMS COURTESY OF GENERAL MILLS



D. CLARKE EVANS/AGENCY IMAGES

Francis's 43-inch vertical leap is one reason his game is so hard to stop.

POSTER INSIDE!

"He was excited [about the trade]," says Dawson. "But he wasn't as excited as we were."

Texas Star

Francis had instant success in Houston. He averaged 18 points, 6.6 assists, and 1.5 steals per game in his first pro season and shared Rookie of the Year honors with forward Elton Brand.

In his third and fourth seasons, Francis was named an All-Star as his stats continued to rise. But while he continued to shine, the Rockets missed the playoffs in each of his first four seasons.

Francis has fulfilled his dream of becoming an NBA player. But he feels his journey will not be complete until he has turned the Rockets into a team that can contend for the NBA championship. Houston head coach Jeff Van Gundy agrees. "Until

his team wins [playoff games,]" he says, "he'll never be considered a significant player in this league."

Winning Ways

In 2002, the Rockets drafted 7'6" center Yao Ming, whose skills and size gave the team a talented young star in the paint. With guard Cuttino Mobley scoring and dishing in the backcourt alongside Francis, the Rockets finished the season 43-39, just one game out of a playoff spot.

The team appeared to be rolling at the start of the 2003-04 season, too. As of December 22, they were tied for sixth place in the highly competitive Western Conference. Francis was leading the team in scoring (17.2 points per game) and assists (5.2).

Occasionally, Francis wanders into the general manager's office and gazes at the framed newspaper articles hanging on the walls. The articles tell of how the Rockets won the NBA championship in back-to-back seasons (1993-94 and 1994-95).

Francis knows how challenging it will be to win the title. Then he thinks about the path he took just to reach the NBA. "It was a hard path," he says. "It helped me build a lot of character and respect for the game of basketball. It was unbelievable."

Francis arrived in the NBA because he worked hard and never gave up. Maybe all he has to do to win the NBA championship is follow the same formula.

didn't want to play. Not wanting a disgruntled player, Vancouver began shopping Francis to other teams. Some fans criticized him for being selfish, but Francis felt he had worked too hard and come too far to lose control of his pro career. He still believes he made the right decision.

"Business is business," he says simply. "I didn't think I could reach my full potential playing in Vancouver."

Rocket general manager Carroll Dawson landed Francis in a blockbuster deal that involved three teams, 11 players, and two future first-round draft picks. Dawson had followed Francis since his days in junior college and knew he was special.

FRANCIS'S STATS

Season	G	Pts.	Scoring Avg.	FG Pct.	RPG	APG	SPG
1999-00	77	1,388	18	44.5	5.3	6.6	1.53
2000-01	80	1,591	19.9	45.1	6.9	6.5	1.76
2001-02	57	1,234	21.6	41.7	7	6.4	1.25
2002-03	81	1,703	21	43.5	6.2	6.2	1.74
2003-04*	26	448	17.2	39.2	5.7	5.2	1.35
CAREER TOTALS*	321	6,364	19.8	43.4	6.3	6.3	1.58

*As of December 22, 2003
 G: Games; Pts.: Points; FG Pct.: Field-Goal Percentage; RPG: Rebounds Per Game; APG: Assists Per game; SPG: Steals Per Game

Rocket Power

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Team Name		Hometown	
Height		Where attended Prep School	
AAU Team		Junior College	
Community College		Drafting Team	
Rockets General Manager		1st Pro Season Award	
Houston Head Coach		Points scored in 2002-03	
Favorite sport to watch		How mother died	
Why he missed Junior Year in High School			