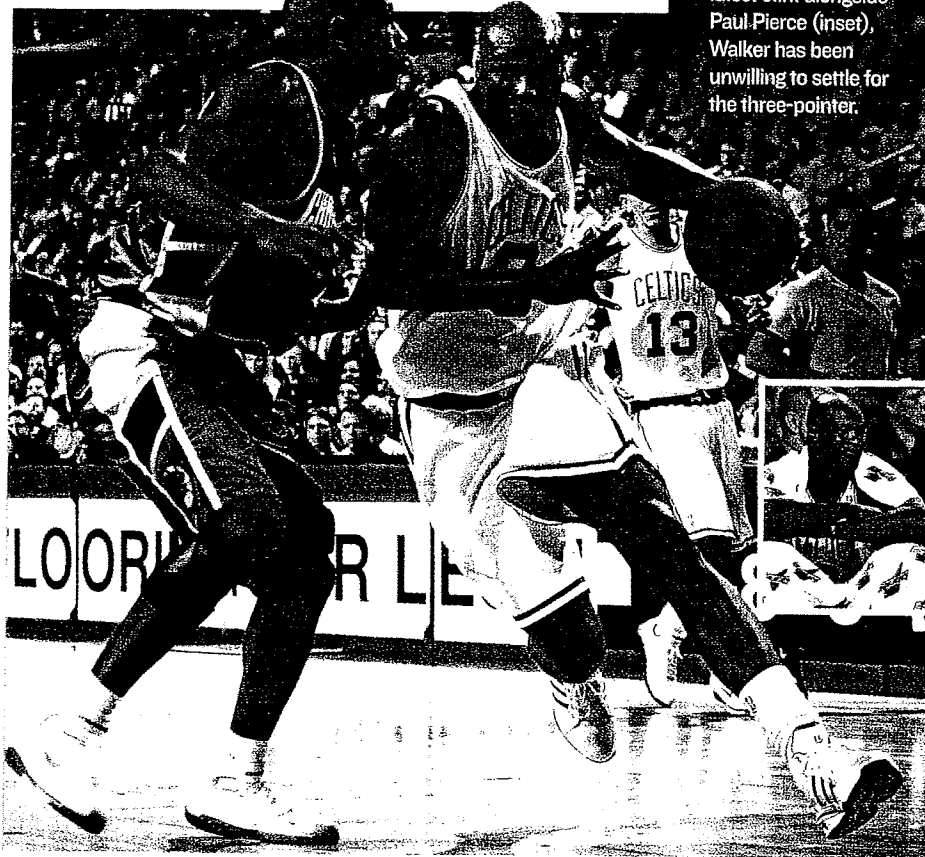


Inside The NBA

by Ian Thomsen

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INSIDE TRACK In his latest stint alongside Paul Pierce (inset), Walker has been unwilling to settle for the three-pointer.

in Boston. In his first five games since arriving from Atlanta, Walker attempted only 12 threes while averaging a team-high 21.4 points and 9.2 rebounds. The Celtics also went 4-1, giving them a 31-29 record and a 1½-game Atlantic Division lead over the 76ers. "The two things I didn't know about him were his energy and his competitiveness," says Rivers, admitting that he used to disparage Walker as an overweight three-point shooter. "He's anything but a lazy player—he's actually a hyper player."

In a city dominated by the reigning champion Red Sox and Patriots, Walker's homecoming brought some needed buzz to the Celtics—and renewed the fans'

faith in Ainge. In his second full season as G.M., he has already delivered on his promise to transform the franchise, hiring Rivers, rejuvenating the roster with a trio of first-round picks (Al Jefferson, Tony Allen and Delonte West) and pulling off an Auerbachian heist of Walker for Gary Payton, Tom Gugliotta, Michael Stewart and a first-round pick—then resigning Payton last Friday after he had been waived by the Hawks. (Ainge pulled the trigger with Atlanta after a deal for Hornets guard Baron Davis collapsed an hour before the deadline.)

Walker's resurgence raises two questions: Why the sudden change at age 28? And is it permanent? "Playing in Atlanta was painful," says Walker, who was

Happy Return

After unloading Antoine Walker two years ago, Celtics G.M. Danny Ainge brought him back, slimmer and better

WHEN Celtics G.M. Danny Ainge traded All-Star forward Antoine Walker in October 2003, the divorce hurt both men. Fans accused Ainge of sabotaging a potential 50-win season, coach Jim O'Brien resigned three months later, and Boston limped to a 36-46 finish. Walker suffered too, bouncing from the Mavericks to the Hawks as his market value plummeted.

That's why it was surprising and sensible for Ainge to reacquire Walker at the Feb. 24 trade deadline. While neither had for-

gotten the other's insults of 17 months ago—Ainge said Walker had an unhealthy "grasp on the franchise"; Walker called Ainge "a snake"—both have realized that they can accomplish more as allies than as enemies. "Danny had to put his stamp on this team, and there's nothing wrong with that," said Walker last Thursday after he had accepted a shooting lesson from Ainge in hopes of stemming his struggles at the line (55.0% at week's end). "I'm more concerned right now about my relationship with coach Doc [Rivers] because I

want to fit in with his system."

Ainge isn't exaggerating when he says, "I see a completely different Antoine." The 6' 9", 245-pound Walker is not only in the best shape of his nine-year career but also more interested in playing with his back to the basket than the player who jacked up a league-leading 7.6 three-pointers per game over the last three seasons of his previous stint

Scout's Take

On the deceptiveness of defensive statistics:

"I would rate none of the top 10 steals leaders as an all-NBA defender. Fans assume you must be a great defender if you're averaging 2.84 steals like Larry Hughes, but he and Paul Pierce [1.65] often hurt their teams by gambling and leaving the defense vulnerable when they don't come up with the ball. LeBron James [2.30] and Allen Iverson [2.25] don't take as many risks because they have such excellent anticipation in playing the passing lanes. Which doesn't mean either one is a great defender—that's somebody who locks up his man on the ball, and unfortunately there's no simple stat to measure that."

DAMIAN STRONHOFER (2)

10-43 as a Hawk. "The grass is not greener elsewhere." Walker doesn't want to leave Boston again when he becomes a free agent this summer, but he also doesn't want to accept anything close to a \$10 million cut in his current \$14.6 million salary. "[We've] got to re-sign him," says Pierce, who has shot 49.2% (up from 44.9%) since his friend's return. "Obviously he makes this team better. Why not at least see what we can do together until my contract is up [in 2008]?"

Before Ainge is willing to commit to three or more years, he must be satisfied that Walker won't revert to his three-launching ways. But Rivers believes that Walker will be willing to remain in the low post to help his team win. "That's who he is now," says Rivers. "I'm sure before the trade [to Dallas] he felt, I can do whatever I want here. I'm Antoine Walker. And then he got traded and realized, Oh, bleep, this is a business, I've got to wake up. Give him credit because he has."

UNsung SHANE BATTIER

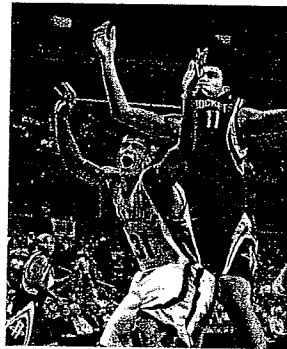
His "Upside"? He Wins a Lot

Though Shane Battier had just won a national title at Duke and been named the college player of the year, NBA scouts were hardly surprised when he slipped to No. 6 in the 2001 draft. Many of them believed that he was a finished product, lacking the alluring "upside" of the high school stars taken ahead of him, Kwame Brown, Tyson Chandler and Eddy Curry. Four years later Battier is doing for the Grizzlies (33-25 at week's end) what he did for the Blue Devils: helping them win.

"He impacts the game in so many ways," says coach Mike Fratello, who credits Battier with helping the Grizzlies go 10-6 in the absence of Pau Gasol (out indefinitely with a left foot injury). "Look at how many big rebounds he has come up with at the ends of games. I'm talking about a one-point game, we're leading, they're

shooting, and several times this year it's been Shane who comes out of the middle of the pack with the ball."

Though the 6' 8" Battier starts at small forward, the label becomes irrelevant once the ball is put into play. Last Friday against the Raptors he initially lined up against 6' 9" shooting guard Jalen Rose. "Then I moved over to Morris Peterson," says Battier, referring to the 6' 7" small forward. "I had [6' 9" power forward] Donyell Marshall for a few possessions, and then I guarded [6' 10" center] Chris Bosh." Every



DOOKIE'S UP The 6' 8" Battier has a rare knack for making big plays against bigger players.

now and then screens would force him to switch onto 6' 1" point guard Rafer Alston. When he wasn't working his way through the Raptors' lineup defensively, Battier was pouring in a career-high 33 points from the post to the three-point line, where with 1:27 remaining he nailed an off-balance shot-clock beater to seal the Grizzlies' 86-75 win.

Battier's statistics (9.8 points and 5.1 rebounds in 31.5 minutes per game through Sunday) are as modest as his vertical leap, but at 26 he has emerged as one of the league's most sophisticated handymen, making vital contributions in every phase of the game. "You look at the winning teams—the Spurs, Pistons, Heat, Suns—and they're all filled with guys who know how to play the game," says Battier. "That's what I see myself as: not as an athlete, but as a player." □

Ian Thomsen's Fast Break



AROUND THE RIM

As the first two picks of the 1992 draft, Shaquille O'Neal and Alonzo Mourning (left) were bitter rivals. "Now that we're on the same team, it's totally different," says Mourning, who joined the Heat last week. One thing that might not change is Miami's rotation. Though Mourning's doctor is comfortable with him playing 20 minutes a game, coach Stan Van Gundy plans to continue giving the majority of Shaq's backup minutes to Michael Doleac because he

doesn't want to break up a winning combination. . . . After shooting 36.0% for the Kings last year, 6' 7" free-agent-to-be Gerald Wallace has learned to put his athleticism to good use for the expansion Bobcats, filling out the box score while steadily improving his accuracy (52.7% over his last eight games at week's end). During the preseason Wallace reportedly turned down a long-term offer from Charlotte. . . . Give the Nuggets the edge for the final Western playoff spot. With 14 home dates among its final 23 games, Denver has a more favorable schedule than the Lakers' (10 of 25 at home) or the Timberwolves' (10 of 23).

WHO IS FRANCISCO ELSON?

The Nuggets' 7-foot backup center didn't play basketball in his native Holland until he was 17 because of his mother's fear that he would suffer the same fate as his older brother Patrick, who died of an apparent heart attack while playing for his local Rotterdam club at 21. Francisco eventually earned his mother's blessing and after two years at Kilgore (Texas) College, two at Cal and four playing professionally in Spain, he joined the Nuggets as a 27-year-old rookie last year. The 235-pound Elson was averaging 3.8 points and 3.1 rebounds in 14.7 minutes through Sunday, outracing most centers down the floor and applying the athletic skills he honed as a karate brown belt. He wears Patrick's number 56 with pride, saying, "I have continued his dream."



BUZZER BEATERS

3. A three-step recovery plan for Blazers owner Paul Allen: 1) Spend one night counting all the empty seats that encircle your lousy basketball team; 2) spend the next day writing down all the lousy advice you've received from your Seattle-based management group; 3) make major changes, or sell the team.

2. The trouble with the Magic's plan to recast Steve Francis as a shooting guard is that he relies on the dribble. Francis has many strengths; the catch-and-shoot off the screen isn't among them.

1. It is nice to report that fewer and fewer people pay attention to Allen Iverson's tattoos anymore. All of a sudden he has grown up to become his generation's charismatic version of Larry Bird.

News and Jack McCallum's analysis, every week at SI.com/nba.

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Happy Return

1. Who is the GM of the Celtics?
A.) Antoine Walker B.) Dan Ainge C.) Doc Rivers D.) Shane Battier
2. What is Walker's scoring average since the trade to the Celtics?
A.) 21.4 B.) 9.2 C.) 13.5 D.) 20.1
3. How old is Walker?
A.) 32 B.) 30 C.) 28 D.) 26
4. What team traded Walker back to the Celtics?
A.) Pistons B.) Lakers C.) Heat D.) Hawks
5. What team does Shane Battier play for?
A.) Grizzlies B.) Heat C.) Hawks D.) Celtics
6. How tall is Battier?
A.) 6'7" B.) 6'9" C.) 6'8" D.) 6'2"
7. Francisco Elson was born in which country?
A.) USA B.) Holland C.) Mexico D.) Canada
8. How old was Elson when he started playing basketball?
A.) 15 B.) 20 C.) 18 D.) 17
9. Who is the coach of the Grizzlies?
A.) Fratello B.) Brown C.) Van Gundy D.) Lewis
10. What college did Battier attend?
A.) Syracuse B.) B.C. C.) Duke D.) Texas