

NBA PLAYOFFS

Out to prove a point

The matchup between **TONY PARKER** and **GARY PAYTON** will decide the **Spurs-Lakers** series—and give each player a chance to make a statement about his future

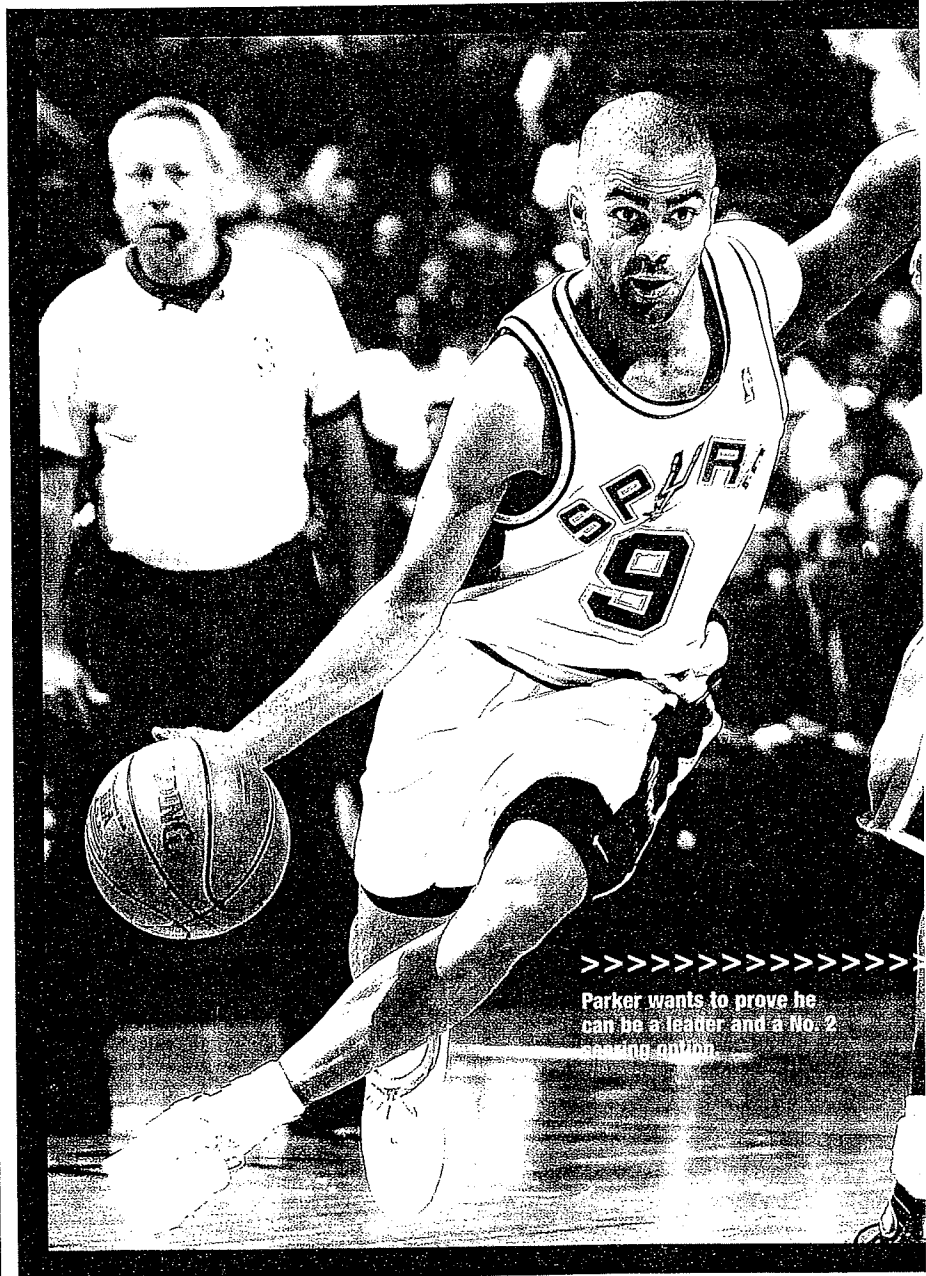
By SEAN DEVENEY

Two years ago, 19-year-old Tony Parker broke through. The Spurs were playing the Sonics at Key Arena in the third game of the 2002 playoffs' opening round, and the rookie Frenchman was having the game of his life. He had scored 13 points in the first quarter to lift the Spurs out of a 9-point deficit and proceeded to lead San Antonio to a 27-point rout of Seattle. In the fourth quarter, Parker made a dazzling move, penetrating the lane and stopping, with Seattle star Gary Payton defending. Parker faked one way, flaunting the ball so close to Payton that Payton got a whiff of leather. Parker forced Payton to bite on the fake, then spun back toward the basket for an easy show-and-go layup. It was Parker's ninth layup of the game, and to make matters worse for Payton, Parker had laid the same move on him just minutes before, in the third quarter. Payton had fallen for it then, too.

At the time, Payton was 33 and had earned nine consecutive first-team All-Defense honors. But Parker finished that game with 23 points, and had Payton so off-balance and overmatched during the series that it was clear a changing of the (point) guard was under way. Payton, despite the weight of his defensive reputation, no longer could keep young, quick point guards in front of him. Payton was—and this was a bitter reality in Seattle—getting old. The Sonics shipped him to Milwaukee almost 10 months later (Seattle had offered Payton to San Antonio for a package that included Parker earlier in 2002, but the Spurs rejected the offer). Adding to the sting for Payton was that, during Game 3, his father told NBC the way his son was getting burned, "If I have to, I will spank him." Ouch.

Parker certainly remembers. "I had a lot of confidence at that time," he says. "It was a big time for me. I was feeling good. That's when I started to get respect from my teammates and coaches. That is when I started to learn to be a leader."

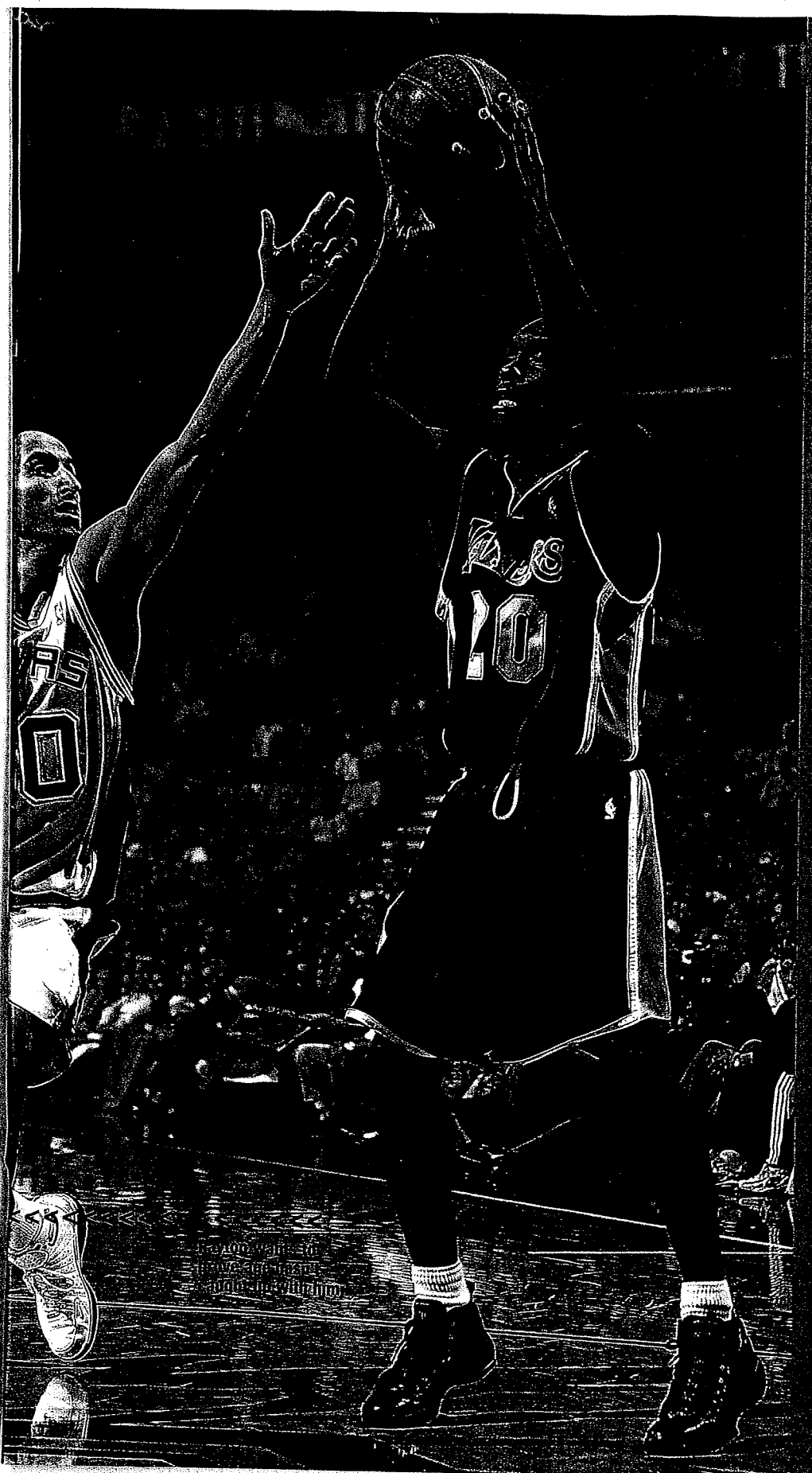
Two years later, Parker and Payton are facing off



Parker wants to prove he can be a leader and a No. 2

again, in a point guard rivalry that feels familiar, yet has changed dramatically thanks to aging (which has benefited Parker and hurt Payton) and some critical events that took place last summer. The Payton-Parker matchup is just one story line in a

much-hyped second-round series that got underway last Sunday with the Spurs winning 88-78. There is the matchup of, arguably, the greatest power forwards in league history, Tim Duncan and Karl Malone. There is struggle



Shaquille O'Neal, promising to go from dormant to dominant against Spurs center Rasho Nesterovic. There is Kobe Bryant facing Bruce Bowen, who usually does to Bryant what garlic and holy water do to Dracula (though Bryant got 31 points in the opener).

The Spurs and Lakers are winners of the past five league championships and have developed an intense rivalry, tinged with a sociological dimension—the big-city Lakers have glitz, drama and Hollywood on their side, while the small-town Spurs are a no-nonsense, fundamental bunch. The survivor will be the favorite to win this year's championship. But, amid the torrent of Lakers-Spurs subplots, do not overlook the showdown of Payton and Parker, point guard past vs. point guard future—even if Lakers coach Phil Jackson and Spurs coach Gregg Popovich tell you to.

"It's not going to be just those two," Jackson told reporters. "It is going to take the whole team. Besides (backup point guard Derek) Fisher and Gary Payton, Kobe volunteered to take (Parker), too."

But don't be fooled. The point guard matchup foiled the Lakers in last year's postseason loss to the Spurs, and Payton has the chance to change that. It's the most crucial matchup of the series and will reverberate beyond this year. How Parker plays will show how ready he is for stardom, and whether he can truly be the No. 2 scorer the Spurs need. How Payton (and Fisher) handles Parker definitely will determine the series, probably will determine the NBA championship and possibly will determine Payton's future in the league.

The biggest change in Parker since he first was dazzling against Payton two years ago is that he has hardened. Sure, he is a better ballhandler, a better passer and a much better shooter these days, but those are natural, on-court improvements that come with experience. What has changed most about Parker is his unwillingness to defer to his teammates, his confidence in his abilities, his toughness. There had been a happy-go-lucky quality about Parker, a good-natured guy who would wilt under Popovich's tough criticism early in his career. But that changed last summer, when, after helping San Antonio win a championship in just his second season, Parker watched the Spurs publicly recruit free-agent point guard Jason Kidd. Kidd, of course, re-signed with the Nets, but Parker was bitter.

"I was mad; I was hurt," Parker admits. "I did not know what I did wrong. But I wanted to come back and show that I could do it—that I could lead this team in the playoffs."

He has done just that, averaging 21 points and 8.5 assists in the Spurs' opening-round sweep of the Grizzlies. This is the best he has played in his career. Popovich continues to be tough on Parker, but, the coach notes, Parker is getting much better at shrugging him off and being a leader. In the second quarter of Game 1, after Duncan was whistled for a foul, Popovich was irate with referee Tony Brothers and was in the midst of giving him a tongue-lashing. Popovich's face was red, and he was in danger of drawing a technical foul when Parker stepped over, put his hand on Popovich's shoulder and said, "Coach, coach, it's OK." Sometimes, it's

Parker who shows the maturity.

"At times, I may be too tough on him," Popovich says. "He's only 21 years old, and I want him to play like he's 32. I've been totally unreasonable in my impatience, but I will continue to be that way because I think it's better than just stroking him. I think it has helped."

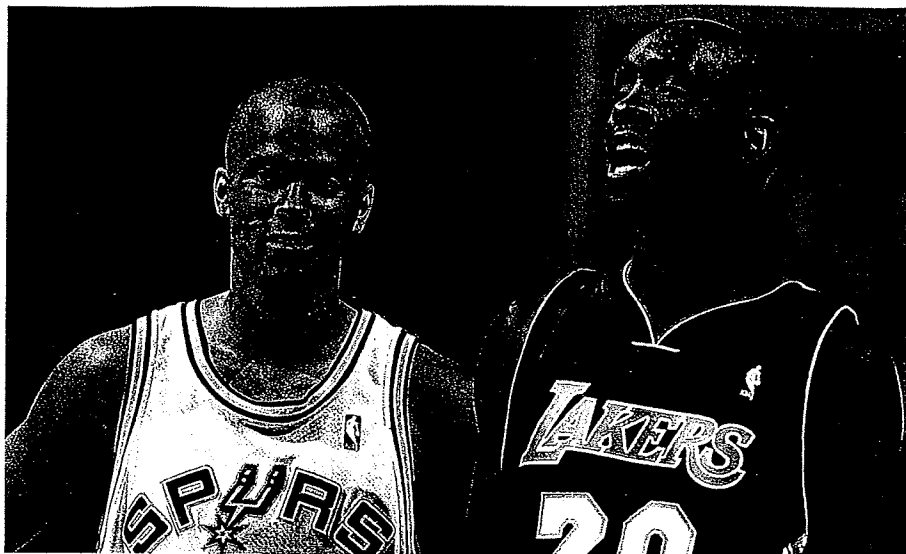
Payton, 35 now, has hardened, too. That is a difficult thing for a player who always has been tougher than a Hun and more stone-faced than Rushmore. Payton signed with the Lakers over the summer, thinking a championship ring was a definite. Instead, he has endured a trying season in which he bucked the triangle offense, averaged 14.6 points (his lowest output in 11 years), feuded with Jackson, had his playing time cut in March, had his time cut further in the postseason, and watched Bryant and O'Neal bicker throughout the year. In the first round against the Rockets, he sat out the fourth quarters in Games 2 and 3, his pride obviously injured. He sat out two practices during the series in an act of what those in Lakers circles acknowledge as pouting.

Consider this series a shot at redemption for Payton, though he got off to a bad start—he shot 1-for-8 in the opener and blew a key defensive assignment in the fourth quarter that allowed Parker to feed Duncan for the game-sealing bank shot. He has been talking about the season as if he can't wait to finish it, opt out of his contract and find a new team. But the chance to play against Parker is an opportunity for Payton to show that he has something left, that the Lakers did not make a mistake in signing him last summer. It also could be his last chance to continue toward a championship.

Not surprisingly, Payton was frustrated after Game 1. Sitting in front of his locker, Payton shook his head about the eight shots he took and wasn't prepared to accept full blame for letting Parker get free—in fact, he wanted Jackson to call his number more on the other end. "I have been playing against that guy for as long as he has been in the league," Payton says. "The way we did it in Seattle was to make him play defense. We have to take it to him, make him work on the defensive end. We don't do that here, it's not part of the offense. When he is out there coming off pick after pick after pick, of course he is going to get open shots.

"It's frustrating, but it is something I have to deal with here. But, we can't worry about that, about whose man it is or who is supposed to be helping. We are trying to win a championship here."

To get there, the Lakers must solve the Spurs' pick-and-roll, arguably the most effective play in the league because Duncan is a big man who can shoot and pass and Parker is lightning quick and can't be contained. Before the series, Jackson predicted the Spurs would run pick-and-rolls "40 or 50 times a game," or on about 50 to 60 percent of their offensive possessions. (In Game 1, the Spurs ran 35 pick-and-roll plays.) The best way to contain the pick-and-roll is to have the defending big man flash out to interrupt the point guard's progress, then slide back to defend against a pass into the lane. But the Lakers have O'Neal and Malone in the middle, and neither is blessed with the



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foot speed to handle pick-and-roll defense.

Parker points out that he can exploit that strategy. He has been effective at blowing past the defense and finishing at the rim, which is one reason the Lakers experimented with the idea of letting Bryant guard Parker. But when he comes off the pick, Parker usually has an open outside shot, and he has been knocking those down (he shot 52.7 percent in the opening round). If he does that throughout the Lakers series—he shot 8-for-19 in Game 1, scoring 20 points with nine assists—the Lakers will have to find a way to fight

through the screen to contest Parker's shot.

"When I am making my outside shots, I make tougher on them," Parker says. "If I make my outside shots, they will have to go over the top to try to get me, and that opens a lot of things for me and for the whole team."

It especially opens the drive into the lane, much the chagrin of Grizzlies coach Hubie Brown, who gushed to the media about Parker after the Spurs eliminated his team. "Once he splits the trap and gets into the paint, you have a point guard who can finish," Brown says. "He is blessed with God-given speed. If he finishes in the paint in the face of your big people right in their face. You go through the NBA right now and you don't have five point guards who can do that

The under-over

Ball: Tony Parker and Gary Payton are NBA veterans. Parker is one of just 10 players 21 and younger to start regularly this season. Payton is one of 10 starters 35 and older. —S.D.

21 and younger

Player	MPG	PPG	RPG	APG
LeBron James, Cavaliers	39:5	20:9	5.5	5.9
Anfernee Hardaway, Suns	36:8	20:6	4:0	1:4
Carmelo Anthony, Nuggets	36:5	21:0	6:1	2:8
Tony Parker, Spurs	34:4	14:7	3:2	5:5
Chris Bosh, Raptors	33:5	11:5	7:4	1:0
Nene, Nuggets	32:7	11:8	6:5	2:2
Eddy Curry, Bulls	29:5	14:7	6:2	0:9
J.J. Redick, Bucks	26:3	7:1	3:2	6:5
Chris Kaman, Clippers	22:5	6:1	5:6	1:0
Heardrick Babcock, Suns	21:4	7:3	1:8	2:4

35 and older

Player	MPG	PPG	RPG	APG
Cliff Robinson, Warriors	34:7	11:8	3:9	3:3
Gary Payton, Lakers	34:5	14:6	4:2	5:5
Karl Malone, Lakers	32:7	13:2	8:7	3:9
Antonio Davis, Bulls	32:1	8:3	8:4	1:7
Vlade Divac, Kings	28:6	9:9	5:7	5:3
Reggie Miller, Pacers	28:2	10:0	2:4	3:1
Kendall Gill, Bulls	25:2	9:6	3:4	1:6
Dale Davis, Blazers	22:1	4:1	5:2	0:9
Ervin Johnson, Timberwolves	14:6	1:9	3:5	0:4
Eden Campbell, Pistons	13:7	5:6	5:2	0:7

Things were not looking good for the Spurs in the third quarter of Game 1, when Bryant went on a hot streak and the Lakers built a 7-point lead. San Antonio's supporting cast was struggling, and the Spurs' offense ground to halt. After Parker made a 6-foot jump with 30 seconds left, the Spurs got a stop and Parker came up with the ball with 8 seconds left. The Spurs' bench implored "Go! Go!" Parker looked up and saw how little time was remaining, and as if to say "Yes, I should go," he scooted up the court, past Payton, and made a 16-foot

Those four points in 30 seconds started a 30-13 run to close the game. Thinking about it after the game, Parke smiles and says, "I knew I had time."

He does have time. He's 21 and just beginning to play to his potential. A few yards away, in the visitors' locker room, Payton cowers in front of his locker, his aches coursing through his 35-year-old limbs. "I know that when he comes at me I can go back at this kid," he says. Payton insists he just needs a chance. But, unlike his newfound rival Parker, Payton is running short on time. **TSI**

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OUT TO PROVE A POINT

1. HOW MANY FIRST TEAM ALL DEFENSE HONORS HAS PAYTON EARNED?

2. WHAT YOUNG POINT GUARD IS TAKING THE PLACE OF GARY PAYTON AS ONE OF THE BEST POINT GUARDS?

3. WHICH TWO TEAMS HAVE WON THE PAST 5 CHAMPIONSHIPS?

4. WHAT PLAYER DID SAN ANTONIO TRY TO GET TO REPLACE TONY PARKER?

5. HOW OLD IS TONY PARKER?

6. WHAT PLAY DO THE SPURS RUN ABOUT 50% OF THE TIME ON THEIR OFFENSIVE POSSESSION?

7. HOW MANY POINTS DID PARKER SCORE IN GAME 1 AGAINST THE LAKERS?

8. THE GRIZZLIES BEAT THE SPURS IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE PLAYOFFS. TRUE OR FALSE.

9. WHO IS THE COACH OF THE SAN ANTONIO SPURS?

10. TONY PARKER WENT TO FRANKLIN ACADEMY FOR HIGH SCHOOL. TRUE OR FALSE.