

"The key to staying on top in this league is that you have to maintain an intense fitness routine."

—NEW YORK KNICKS GUARD ALLAN HOUSTON

by Grant Glickson

They have always leapt higher, stood taller, run faster and exhibited more athletic ability than any other group of professional athletes on the planet. Now, after decades of being known as acrobats on stilts, National Basketball Association players have fast become the most well-conditioned and finely tuned athletes in all of sports.

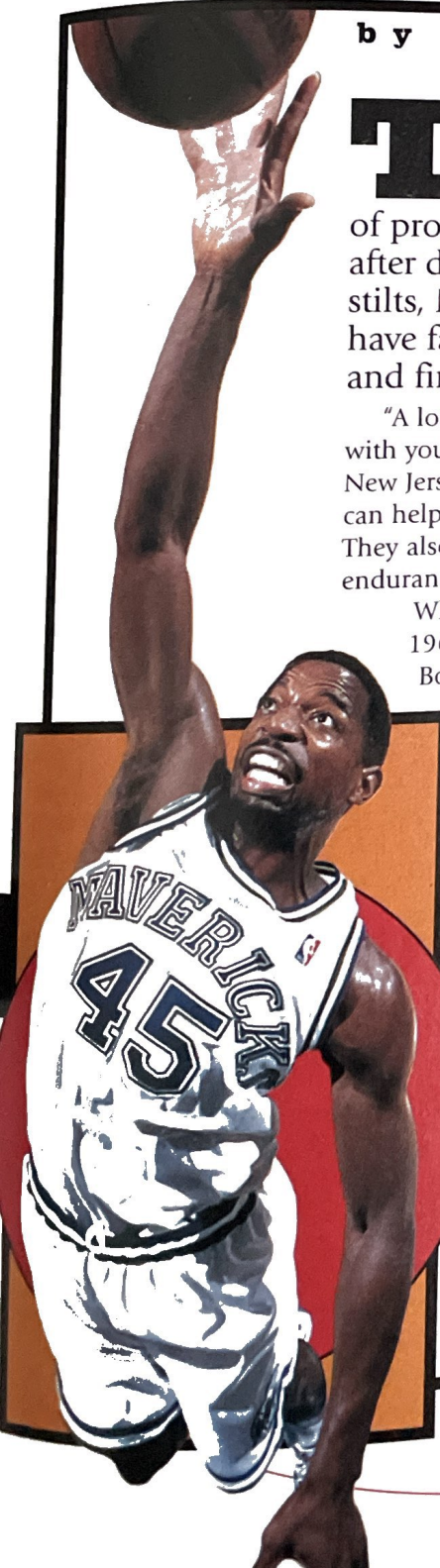
"A lot of players used to think that weights would mess with your shot," says Sam Cassell, a point guard for the New Jersey Nets. "But they're finding out that weights can help increase the range (distance) of your shot. They also improve shoulder and arm muscle endurance, and keep injuries to a minimum."

While NBA players have been hitting the weights since the late 1960s, the days of watching muscle-deprived players like Manute Bol display their string-bean brand of basketball are not that far removed. It wasn't until the early-'80s, when stars such as Michael Cage, Patrick Ewing, Karl Malone and Charles Oakley started building their bodies, that a new breed of muscle-bound players like Shawn Kemp and Anthony Mason were born. Players are now filling out their uniforms like never before. Competition has intensified, and everyone is looking for an edge.

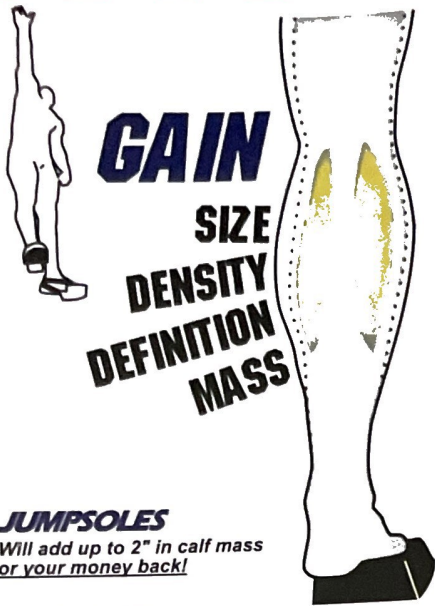
With hard bodies now roaming courts at every level, basketball has become more of a contact sport than in years past. Driving with authority to the hoop, getting off shots after being fouled, battling through picks and posting up is tougher than ever.

"You have to have some weight on you in this league or you're going to get knocked all over the place," says Chris Mills, whose solid build (6'-6", 218) helped him become a two-way force for the Cleveland Cavaliers before signing a big-bucks free agent contract with the Boston Celtics (he now plays for the New York Knicks). "Basketball is a lot more physical than people think. You have to be in great shape to survive."

(left) Dallas Mavericks forward A.C. Green starts his running, biking and weight training for the next season in May or June, and does not do any court work until July.



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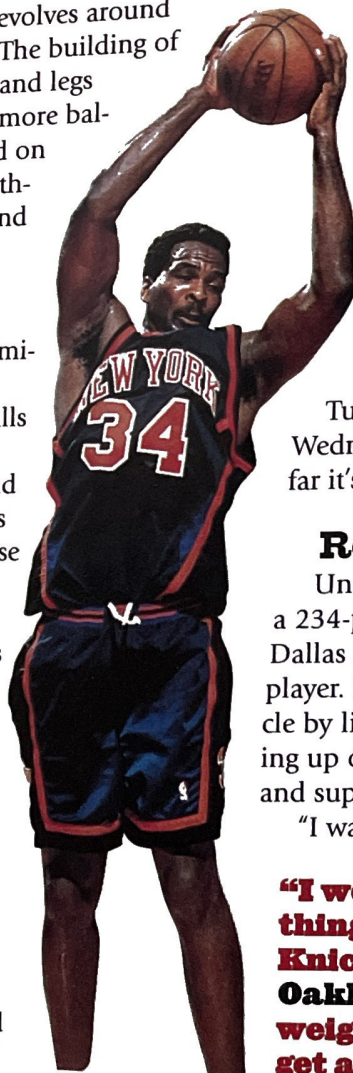
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These days, weight training for most NBA players consists of a conventional lifting routine that revolves around functional strength. The building of muscles in the back and legs helps them become more balanced and controlled on the court. The strengthening of shoulders and arms improves their shooting range.

Strengthening the lower back and abdominals, with trunk and torso stabilization drills and various kinds of crunches, ab raises and medicine ball work, is paramount, since those areas are considered the center of power.

"Basketball players don't have to lift weights like football players," says Cage, a 6'-10", 248-pound power forward with the Nets who would terrify quarterbacks if he opposed them. "You have to know what muscles you need to train. We need lean, not mass. Once I



"I've made millions of dollars as a result of my body being healthy and ready to perform every night."

— NBA VETERAN MICHAEL C...

understood that and began paying attention to my diet, my game started to soar. That's why I haven't missed a game in eight years."

Greg Brittenham, the Knicks' strength and conditioning coach, and author of *Complete Conditioning for Basketball*, says that the mistake many players make is that they tend to overtrain their chests.

"Players like to work the pecs because they get immediate feedback," he says. "The improvements are quickly visible. Unfortunately, chest mass tends to propel them forward onto the balls of their feet, and makes it less easy to move around."

Oakley, widely known as one of the strongest men in the league, is virtually impossible to move out of the paint. The 6'-9", 245-pound power forward for the Knicks spends a lot of time in the weightroom. Brittenham is there to make sure Oakley doesn't get too top-heavy and become as immobile as an oak tree. While Oakley says that he eats everything in sight, including junk food, he still tries to get in two nutritionally sound meals a day, which include salad, pasta, fish and chicken.

"I work hard at everything I do," he says. "I go in there (the weightroom) and try and get a good pump. I work the upper body on Mondays, the legs on Tuesdays, back and shoulders on Wednesdays and take off Thursdays. So far it's working out pretty good."

Rookie Muscle

Until recently, Ike Nwankwo, 6'-11", a 234-pound rookie center with the Dallas Mavericks, was a tall and wiry player. But he added 35 pounds of muscle by lifting five days a week and loading up on carbohydrates, chicken breasts and supplements.

"I was always very skinny," he says. "I

"I work hard at everything I do," says New York Knicks forward Charles Oakley. "I go in there (the weightroom) and try and get a good pump."

was getting banged around a lot because of my size. I decided that I was going to get bigger. Now I feel much stronger. I do the pushing around now. Plus I like the fact that I look good on the court."

Looking good and feeling good is the company line NBA teams are now selling its players. Every team has invested thousands of dollars in state-of-the-art exercise equipment, strength and conditioning coaches and masseuses. Locker rooms are stocked with various snacks that ensure energy production and recovery. Candy bars have been replaced by energy bars, soda with juices and high-energy smoothies and potato chips with fresh and dried fruit.

"I've preached nutritional and physical fitness since I first started playing," says Cage, a 14-year veteran who is second on the active list, having played in over 660 consecutive regular-season games. "It's nice to see that everyone is talking about juicing and physical training and nutrition. Massages have also become a big part of our recovery. Ten years ago, if I wanted a massage, they handed me the yellow pages."

Cage, who grew up eating lots of red meat, says that he began paying attention to his diet after taking a nutrition course as a freshman at San Diego State. "I realized that if I kept eating the way I was, I wasn't going to be around for very long," he says. "So I started learning what I could eat to become healthier and improve my performance on the court."

Cage's diet consists mainly of a lot of chicken, fish, vegetables, fresh and dried fruit, juices, vitamins, protein and supplements. Vegetable and soy burgers are among his favorite food choices. Junk food, dairy products and red meat are taboo.

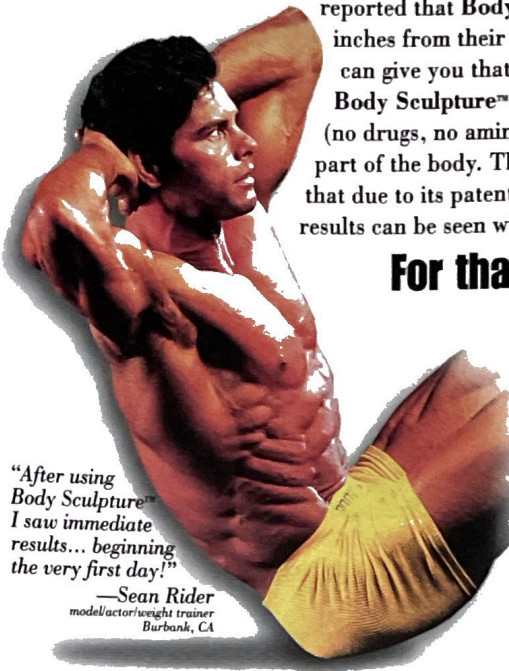
During the off-season, Cage, 35, who plans on opening a health club in Scottsdale, Arizona next July, does a lot of weight training and cardiovascular exercising with his family. His wife, Jodi, is his workout partner and opponent on the tennis court. He says she's the better player, so he has to run hard to compete. Tennis helps him improve his lateral movement. He does a lot of other off-season cardio training as well, such as swimming.

"When young guys see someone like me, who's played 14 years virtually injury-free, they all want to know what I'm doing," Cage says. "I've made mil-

continued on page 84

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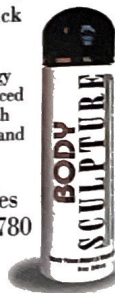
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continued from page 39

lions of dollars as a result of my body being healthy and ready to perform every night."

Leading the Pack

A.C. Green, the NBA's version of baseball ironman Cal Ripken, has played in the second most consecutive games, over 900, in league history. He has surpassed the all-time leader, Randy Smith. Green has competed in 900 of 903 games for the Lakers, Phoenix and Dallas since entering the NBA in 1985. Green says that he starts his running, biking and weight training for the next season in May or June, and does not do any court work until July. He eats twice a day, and his meals consist mainly of poultry and pasta. He does not favor red meat or seafood.

"I don't think my diet or training regimen is any different than any of the other guys," he said. "The key is knowing what your pattern is and how long it takes your body to get to its maximum level. For me, it's only four to six weeks."

As for Cassell, he prefers following a bodybuilder's training regimen and diet. He hits the weights four days a week throughout the year. He consumes five small meals a day in three-hour intervals. The eating frenzy begins with a six-egg-white omelette and a cup of oatmeal, followed by a supplement meal, chicken breast and potatoes for lunch, then another supplement meal, before concluding with a fish dinner.

"I'm a real big fan of bodybuilding," he said. "When I retire I'll continue to do it. I'll definitely put on more size than I have right now."

Training All Year

With owners dishing out monster contracts, basketball has become a year-round profession. Players are expected to come into training camp with hard bodies, in excellent anaerobic and aerobic shape. Improving speed, strength, power, quickness, agility, coordination and conditioning is how the average player gets better.

Basketball is primarily considered an anaerobic sport. Training methods focus

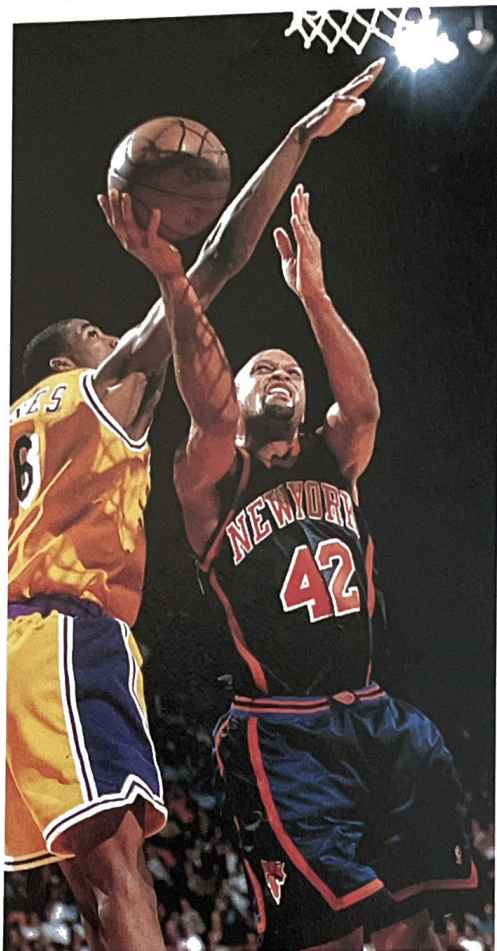
on explosive types of activities that last up to three minutes in length. Drills are designed to incorporate movements, sprinting, sliding, backpedaling and defensive slides, used in competition.

Plyometric (explosive) training, which combines strength with speed, is the most effective way to become anaerobically fit. Skipping, jumping and medicine ball chest passes are some of the more popular plyometric exercises.

Being in good aerobic condition is what helps basketball players recover rapidly during free throws, changes of possession and time outs from an anaerobic activity. Biking, swimming and running hills are

among the best ways to become aerobically fit.

"The key to staying on top in this league is that you have to maintain an intense fitness routine," says Allan Houston, a 6'-6", 200-pound guard on the Knicks who happens to be one of the NBA's hardest workers off the court. "Every year you have to try and improve something in your game. If you don't, you're not going to get better." **E&H**



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