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By John Nemo #16

Flip Saunders is standing on the Target Center floor, hands in his pockets after a practice, asking to think back to when he took over coaching duties for the Minnesota Timberwolves – December 18, 1995.

“It’s really funny, because when I first took over and we drafted Kevin Garnett, our biggest concern at that time – not to name names¹ – was how certain guys we had on the team were going to affect his development. I can remember saying, ‘I think maybe the most mature player we have is this nineteen-year-old kid.’ He was just one of those guys who had that and he carried that. He had that type of presence.”

Garnett’s presence has continued to grow, from a skinny, teenage phenom who jump-started the flood of high school talent to the NBA to the best player on the planet.²

“I don’t know what else he can do,” Saunders says of Garnett. “If he’s not the MVP this year ... I mean, the guy won Western Conference Player of the Month four times³. I don’t think there’s any question about it.”

An hour after Saunders finishes speaking, Garnett emerges from the Minnesota locker room, wearing jeans, an aqua blue golf shirt with the collar flipped up and his trademark smile. He carries a couple bottles of Gatorade with him as he sits down on a set of concrete steps, ready to talk about the best season of his nine-year NBA career.

“Y’all have to understand my take,” he says when asked about his individual accomplishments. “The regular season is the regular season. Individually, yeah, it was cool. It was alright.”

Alright? Despite his humble words, there’s no getting around the fact that Garnett’s gigantic 2003-04 campaign put Minnesota into rarefied air – the best record (58-24) in the Western Conference, a top seed for the playoffs and belief among NBA fans that the Timberwolves have finally become the elite team Garnett has always wanted them to be.

“When I was nineteen I really didn’t talk that much and just tried to listen,” Garnett says, reflecting back to his rookie year. “I had some great guys around me, like Terry Porter, Sam Mitchell, Doug West. And I also had some guys who were labeled knuckleheads like J.R. Rider and Christian Laettner. But they were really great guys that people didn’t know and didn’t see the other side of. I sort of saw what I wanted to be and how to be it, but at the same time what I didn’t want to do or didn’t want to be.”

What Garnett has become is one of the most respected players – and leaders – in the league.

“I think one of the reasons why I chose to come here was because KG was here and because of the player that he was and is,” says Timberwolves forward Mark Madsen⁴. “I liked how intense he was, how skilled he was, I liked the leader that he was. Now, off the court, I have found one of the most professional human beings I have ever come into contact with in this game. You want to talk about a true professional, that’s KG. You want to talk about a guy who loves his teammates, I’m talking about KG.”

Whether it’s Madsen or veteran stars like Sam Cassell or Latrell Sprewell, everybody on the Timberwolves’ roster defers to Garnett when asked who’s running the show in Minnesota.

“There were no egos involved,” Cassell says of himself and Sprewell coming to Minnesota in trades before the season. “We know Kevin Garnett is the only star we have. He’s the front liner. Me and Spree, we’re just the sidekicks. We’re the opening acts. We understood that when we first got here, that we couldn’t take no light from Kevin Garnett, and we didn’t try to. We just came here to make his job easier, and that’s what we did.”⁵

Says Garnett: “I knew off the first conversation the three of us had, I knew it was going to be something special, that we would do some outstanding things.”

It’s hard to imagine Garnett being any more outstanding – on or off the court – than he’s been in 2003-04.

“The reason KG is so great is he has the qualities of loyalty that he has shown to both me and this organization,” Saunders says. “He has respect for the game. He shows that every practice how hard he plays, he shows it in every game with the passion he plays with, and he shows it every time he meets and NBA great, whether it’s ‘Mr. Russell’ or ‘Mr. Baylor’ or ‘Mr. West.’ People say Kevin’s the poster boy of guys coming out (and entering the NBA draft) early. Well, he’s also the poster child for how a player should play.”

¹ Flip won’t, but we will – J.R. Rider and Christian Laettner, to name two.

² Garnett averaged a career high 24.2 ppg and 13.9 rpg along with 5.0 apg and became the first player in 29 years and only the fifth in NBA history to lead the league in total points and total rebounds.

³ KG became the first player in the award’s 25-year history to win it four times in one season.

⁴ Mad Dog signed this summer with Minnesota after three seasons – and two NBA titles – with the L.A. Lakers.

⁵ Spree (16.8 ppg) and Cassell (20.8 ppg, 7.3 apg) became members of Minnesota’s “Big Three” along with Garnett, as the trio combined to score 60 of the team’s 94 points per game.