



15 STRONG

It's More Than a Slogan, It's a Burning Desire

By Dwyane Wade

Unfinished business. That was the prevailing feeling as we approached the 2005-06 season. When you come within 90 seconds of reaching the NBA Finals and don't do it, you're not going to have an enjoyable summer — I certainly didn't. ⚡ The missed opportunity served as a driving force for us. We felt like we should have been representing the Eastern Conference and we weren't going to allow

another opportunity to slip through if we had the chance. Next thing you know, we're welcoming eight new players to training camp shortly after the team pulled off the biggest trade in NBA history, which involved 13 players and five teams. I remember guys thinking, "We had a great team the year before, so why the change, especially now?" I would be lying if I said that we didn't have doubts, not with the players coming in but about changing what we believed to be an already great team.

Early in the season, we were playing .500 ball, so those doubts only grew bigger, not only internally, but also from the media following the team. Our coach at the time, Stan Van Gundy, stepped down in early December, and things became even more uncertain. At the time, we were a confused team. We hadn't played that well, but we

had also been without Shaq for 18 games. Once Pat Riley came in as head coach, we didn't have time to look back. The only direction left to go was forward in order to get our season back on track.

When Coach Riley took over, I didn't know what to expect, but I had faith. When one of the greatest coaches in the history of the game becomes your coach, you know you are in good hands. It was an honor. One of the first things he told us was that we were going to turn into more of a power team, which was a departure from how we had played under Coach Van Gundy. After three games, however, I knew I was going to love our new style because I was getting more opportunities and fast breaks. Coach Riley helped me improve my overall game. If I played poorly or if I played well, he always pointed out something to show me the way

it was supposed to be done.

"If you want to be a winner," he said, "this is what you are going to have to do and what you should try to do."

Who am I to argue with him? So, I always tried to do it.

It took us awhile to adjust to the new style. Things didn't really click for us until, coincidentally, a 36-point loss to the Mavericks in Dallas on national television February 9. We were embarrassed and humiliated. In the team meeting after the loss, I remember Gary Payton standing up and asking what it was going to take to get better.

Coach Riley answered, "It's time to follow the leader."

We did. Any individual agendas — ranging from who shoots, who plays, what the rotation is — all took a back seat. The loss was a wake-up call, and we collectively decided to play as a unit beginning with our next game, three days later, versus the Pistons. We came from behind to win that game and immediately rolled to nine more victories. In those 10 consecutive wins, we came back eight times during the fourth quarter.

Even though we sort of sputtered toward the end of the regular season, losing six of our last 10 games, we knew we had the second seed in the Eastern Conference wrapped up.

Once the playoffs came around, there was a fair amount of people predicting that we would get knocked off, and that Chicago could be the team to do it, especially after they came back to tie the series. I think we really underestimated the Bulls, but we took their best punch. Outside of The Finals, that was probably the hardest series we played and one of the hardest that I've ever been a part of in my young career.

The next series against the New Jersey Nets started off poorly for us, as we lost Game 1 by 12 points. Once again, our downfall was predicted. But, we bounced back after realizing that our problems were coming from the defensive side of the ball — too many transition points and not enough rebounding. The key was to get back to playing as a team, which we did with the help of a huge performance from Antoine Walker in Game 2. From there, we rolled into Detroit, the series we had been waiting for all season long. We knew we could defeat this team if we played well. We had a lot of confidence in ourselves, and with Cleveland playing them so tough in the previous round, we saw the way they could be beaten. It took six games, but we got it done.

After the first two games of the NBA Finals, the doubters were out again with talk that the series wouldn't make it back to Dallas — a point that bothered us, but one that didn't surprise us since we had been underestimated all year. In fact, it lit a fire under us to go out and prove our point. Even during Game 3 when we were down 13 with 6:34 left, we still believed. We believed, becoming only the third team in NBA Finals history to win four straight against a great Dallas team.

In the end, it really was about "15 Strong" for us, a motto that came to represent togetherness and dedication to one another. No matter if we were high or low, through thick and thin, we always stuck together as a team. A lot of the guys on this team — Alonzo, Gary, Antoine — were doubted because they had never won a championship despite their individual success. It's just great when you can go out there and prove people wrong, and do it the right way. We all made plays to get to this point and achieve this goal, and that is what team basketball is all about ... 15 Strong.

