



# Chris Paul

## TEAM USA BASKETBALL

↑ WHEN CHRIS PAUL STANDS NEXT to towering pituitary cases like LeBron James and Dwight Howard at the introduction of Team USA in New York's Rockefeller Center on a hot July day, the six-footer looks like he might be just another coach or trainer for the team, not one of the most gifted players the NBA has seen in years. "Yeah, I look pretty normal next to the giants I'm usually around," Paul says. "But a lot of times when I'm bringing the ball up the court,

I use the big guys on the opposite team as screens so the defense can't see me." That's typical Paul, always looking for an edge to add to his game.

Paul supplies just the kind of attitude Team USA will need to bring to the Olympics in China this year if it hopes to erase the memory of its disgraceful 2004 performance in Athens, where for the first time since 1988, the U.S. failed to take home the gold medal. "It's very important for us to redeem ourselves," Paul says. "You got guys on this team that are hungry and want to be a part of a renewal and who aren't satisfied with what they've already accomplished. To win, this team has to be both anxious and excited about playing in Beijing."

Watching him play, it's immediately evident Paul has that thing all the great

one-name players—Jordan, Magic, Bird—shared, a will to obliterate the opposition. Which is surprising because when you talk to the 23-year-old native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, he is a polite, well-spoken guy, but even in a friendly game, forget it, he'd do his best to destroy you. "I'm laid-back and chill," Paul says. "But on the court, it's another world. If my mom was out there, even she's going to have to get out of the way. I just hate to lose more than I love winning."

The third-year New Orleans Hornets point guard proved his competitive worth again and again this past NBA season when he averaged over 20 points and 11 assists a game. He's fantastically quick and has an arsenal of dazzling street-ball moves, but somehow, unlike so many

flashy ball-handlers, he never seems out of control or a ball hog. His game has helped to resurrect the moribund Hornets franchise. And during a remarkable playoff run last spring, he gave an entire city with a grim recent history something to root for besides the *Girls Gone Wild* bus coming back to town. This summer, the Hornets extended Paul's contract for three years. "I love this city — it has its own language," he says, explaining why he decided to stay in the small-market town. "The people make New Orleans. And the food. It's a place that's going to come back." And don't expect him to get fat and happy with his new \$15 million-a-year deal: "I never want that feeling of settling. You have to always believe you can get better. If you've learned it all, then why play?"

SEAN WOODS