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"I was born to coach"

by Ken Turetzky / April 30, 2003

The **Dallas Mavericks** are preparing for Game 5 of their opening-round playoff series against **Portland**. The series should have ended in four, and no player knows that better than **Avery Johnson**, the only member of this team to win an NBA championship.

Out on the American Airlines Center floor, **Michael Finley** drives the lane and Johnson, guarding low, aggressively smacks the ball away. Finley utters a loud oath.

Minutes later, head coach **Don Nelson** watches his newest assistant coach sprint to the locker room. "He's a good-lookin' young lad, there, Avery is," Nelson says. "He's half-player, half-coach."

For the second straight season, Nelson made the difficult decision to leave Johnson off the playoff roster. The Mavericks needed **Evan Eschmeyer**'s big body (or at least his six fouls) in the post-season more than they did a third-string point guard, so Johnson would be disappointed again.

Yet, he contributes as a relentless practice player, and attends all coaching sessions, where he watches, listens, and offers an occasional comment. Johnson commands respect around the Mavericks. He won an NBA title with the **San Antonio Spurs** in 1999, and this year became the first player less than six feet tall to play in 1,000 NBA games.

"He's the only guy on our bench with a ring," Finley says. "So, whatever he says, you have to take it to heart because he's been there, he's done that. He's a true veteran, one of the true leaders of this team."

Although undrafted out of Southern University, Johnson, 38, is completing his 15th NBA season. Rumors tag him as a candidate for the vacant **Toronto Raptors** coaching job, or even the Mavs job, should Nelson vacate the role in a season or two.

Johnson is proud of his achievements as a player and expects to accomplish more as a coach. Asked a question, he cocks his head and considers the reply for a moment, before responding in a folksy, ambling but intensely focused manner, delivered in his distinctively scratchy voice:

"What happens is, certain guys, they'll play in college or the NBA, and then, they'll be out of the game for a couple of years. And all of a sudden they'll say, 'You know what? I don't have nuthin' else to do; I'll go coach.' No, no, no! I was born to coach. I was born to work with people."

Johnson says, "Fortunately for me, playing in San Antonio, I had a chance to really go behind the scenes with Pop (**Gregg Popovich**, the 2003 NBA Coach of the Year) and see how he does things. Only I was more in my playing role then, so I was really lookin' at things from a player's standpoint.

"Now you come on this side and I'm not playin' as much. I'm a little bit more focused on game preparation and how Nellie coaches matchups and just his way of thinking. Working with Coach Nelson is going to provide me with a lot of experience and knowledge and insight, so whenever I make that transition, I think I'm going to have a lot to offer a team."

Johnson has one year remaining on his contract with the Mavericks. He has said he'd like to play perhaps two more years in the league. But he admits he's already received "informal" inquiries about NBA coaching

positions.

"I'm really grateful that people in high places think that much of me. I'm just gonna take my time and see what happens. But I intend on comin' back playing," he says.

At the moment, though, Johnson hopes to help shepherd the Mavericks into the late rounds of the playoffs. "I think the main thing is, we've grown. These guys have had a chance to be in the playoffs for three years in a row. And hopefully, they've learned from their experiences. That's what it's all about -- growing and learning and not making the same mistakes. Knowing that feeling that you felt when you got knocked out, that you wanted to continue to play."

Johnson will motivate his teammates any way he can. "Yeah, yeah, I've been doin' that whether I'm in uniform or a part of the coaching staff. That's my role. And that's what I'm tryin' to explain to people. I'm really passionate about what I do. I love bein' on the team," he says. "I'm the third point guard; I get a chance to mentor **Steve** (**Nash**) and **Nick** (**Van Exel**). I get a chance to run teams through plays and offenses and (share) feedback with the coaches.

"I really love what I'm doing," Johnson says. "So, that's why I really don't wanna rush into anything else yet."

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