



Celtics reserve power forward Leon Powe gets sideline pointers from assistant coach Clifford Ray during his rookie 2006-07 season.

# Clifford Ray: Coaching the Big Men

By DAVID DRIVER

# They nicknamed him Marmaduke at OU, a center who knew how to dominate, a skill he is passing along in the NBA.

**C**lifford Ray, though no Hall of Famer, certainly had the credentials to be a successful coach.

An All-Big Eight player for the Sooners, Ray led the conference in rebounding. He was taken in the third round of the 1971 NBA draft and played 10 years for the Chicago Bulls and Golden State Warriors.

While the former Sooner center played at the highest level, making a living as a coach who specializes in working with promising "big men" (centers and power forwards) was another matter. Ray admits the idea seemed a long shot some 20 years ago.

"I didn't ever think I would be respected," admits Ray, who as a player helped lead the Warriors to an NBA title in 1975. "I worked hard. I am very passionate about this."

Two decades after he began his coaching career, Ray has doubled his years as a pro player. Many consider him the best big-man coach in the NBA, according to a 2005 article in *The Sporting News*.

Now Ray is aiming for an NBA title as an assistant coach. He is in his second season as an assistant coach for the Boston Celtics, who roared out of the gate with 30 wins in its first 34 games in the 2007-08 season.

"I always expected to be doing this well," says Ray, prior to a game in Washington in January. "I just want to have the opportunity to win every night. That is it."

After a subpar 24-58 season in 2006-07, the Celtics' off-season trades brought All-Star Kevin Garnett from Minnesota and Ray Allen from Seattle to join team captain Paul Pierce, invigo-



Boston Celtics Assistant Coach Clifford Ray

rating one of the model NBA franchises.

"People call you about tickets. That is the biggest thing" that has changed this season, says Ray, with a laugh. "If you don't do well, the fans in Boston will always be patient."

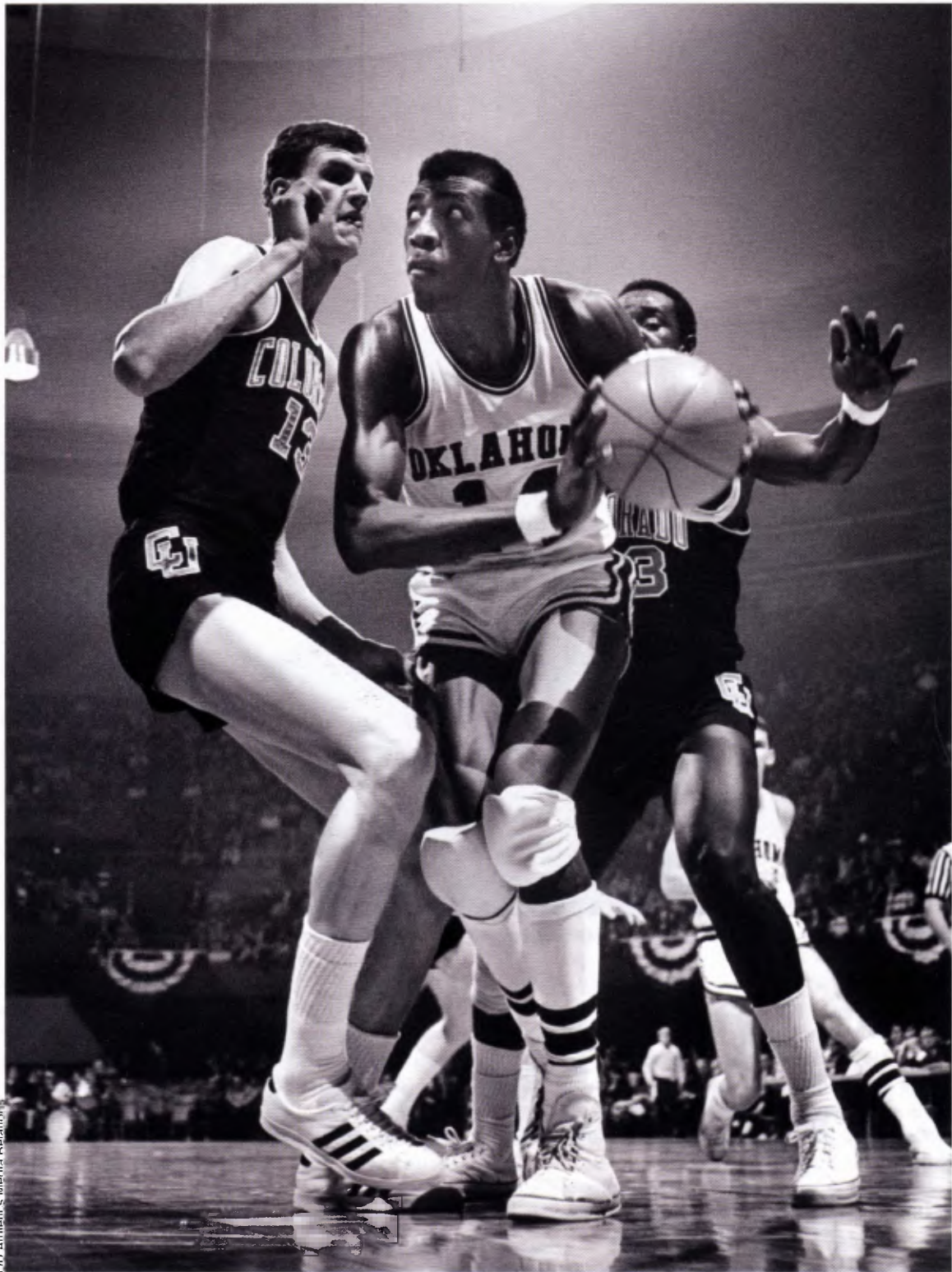
How does Ray approach his work with Garnett? "I leave him alone. If I see something, he will say, 'Old School, what do you see?' I just do what I usually do," Ray says. "I spend a lot of time with the rookies. We just try to develop our talent. That is what [head coach] Doc Rivers wants me to do."

Adds Ray: "Developing young big men is not so much what you are trying to change. It is being consistent. Everything is not basketball-related. It is an ongoing process. All you are as an assistant is an extension of Coach Rivers."

Ray's coaching career began with six years in the Dallas Mavericks organization, then in the Continental Basketball Association and as an assistant coach with the New Jersey Nets, Golden State Warriors, Cleveland Cavaliers and Orlando Magic.

*The Sporting News* credits Dallas with leading the league in rebounding in 1987-88 when Ray coached there. The same was true of New Jersey in 1995-96, and Golden State was first or second in 2000-01 and 2001-02 when Ray was on the staff.

For the past several summers Ray, along with former Celtic and Warrior great Robert Parish, has held a Big Man Camp at the noted IMG Academies in Bradenton, Florida. IMG gained world fame as a training ground for top tennis players, and later



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Oklahoma's All Big Eight center Clifford Ray led the conference in rebounding in 1971, going on to a 10-year NBA career with the Chicago Bulls and Golden State Warriors.



To Boston Celtics assistant coach Clifford Ray falls the task of molding rookie power forward Glen "Big Baby" Davis, left, into as dominant an NBA player as he was at LSU.

for Major League Baseball players and other pro athletes.

"It's a great setting. The people there have given us a great opportunity," offers Ray. "It has been a fun thing for me. I have to be able to help some (young) guys.

"The main thing is footwork. You have to be able to play inside and outside" as a big man in the NBA, explains Ray. "Robert and I want to help young people. We want them to see big-men play as fun. That is what we are trying to teach."

Ray has worked with some of the best big men in the NBA, including Ben Wallace of the Chicago Bulls and Dwight Howard of the Orlando Magic.

"The list keeps going. I love seeing a young, big guy do well," says Ray proudly. He worked at length during the 2005-06 season with Howard in Orlando and was so effective that Howard's father criticized the Magic when Ray left to take a job with the Celtics. Of Howard, Ray says, "You try to get him to understand he needs to have a power game and a finesse game."

Ray bemoans the lack of dominant big men in the NBA – remembering that he played against the likes of Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Elvin Hayes. He remarks that successful teams in the NBA today utilize guards and a fast-paced style. "That is not going to change," says Ray.

Ray gives a lot of credit to the University of Oklahoma for his success. "Oklahoma gave me an opportunity to bring my family to Norman, Oklahoma – and succeed. I got my degree . . . all of that I owe to the University of Oklahoma," says Ray. "They took care of me, a student away from home."

His sister, Teresa Turner, is the University's assistant direc-

tor of athletic academic affairs and also played basketball for the Sooners. She knows that for her brother coaching in the NBA is tough, since an assistant normally has to move on when a head coach loses his job.

Turner says that Ray bought a house for their parents when he turned pro. They moved to Oklahoma from South Carolina, along with some of Ray's siblings. Turner's daughter, Chelsea, carried on the family basketball tradition, competing for Division II Cameron University in Lawton.

Ray also says he owes a lot to Donald Carter, the former owner of the Dallas Mavericks, who hired him in 1987. *The Sporting News* story recounts: "Carter told Ray the team already had hired head coach John MacLeod and did not need more coaches. But Ray held up his championship ring and told Carter, 'MacLeod does not have one of these.' Ray was hired, but only as a part-time coach. Carter put Ray in charge of the team fitness center, which meant he had to schedule practice time, mop the floors and clean the latrines. 'How many coaches have scrubbed toilets to get into the league?' Ray asks."

In one of Ray's first games with the Celtics in the 2006-07 season, the team played the Wizards in Washington less than a week after the death of former Boston head coach, general manager and president Red Auerbach. "A guy like Red makes you want to strive for something in life. He is just an inspiration," says Ray.

For some top young players in the NBA, the same can be said of Clifford Ray.

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