

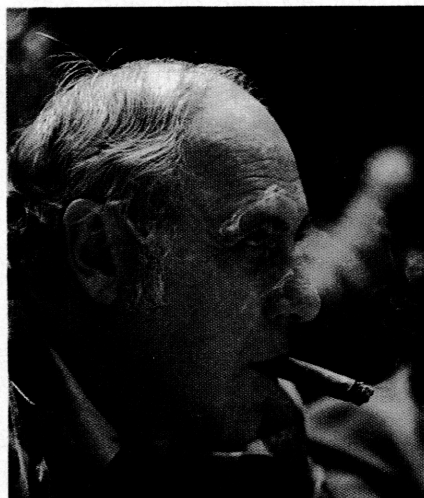
Basketball Is a Three-Letter Word

R-u-n. And that's why the Celtics will win it again

It's one of the oldest basketball arenas in America, built atop the massive yellow-brick North Station in an abandoned neighborhood of Boston's North End. Constructed half a century ago with hockey on the mind of owner and spectators alike, Boston Garden reflects a city that went from the Twenties to World War II as a hockey-crazed town that did not play basketball competitively even at the high school level. But in this ancient building some of the most remarkably gifted athletes have played the game of basketball for 25 years as it has been played nowhere else. They are the men of the Boston Celtics; the world's greatest team.

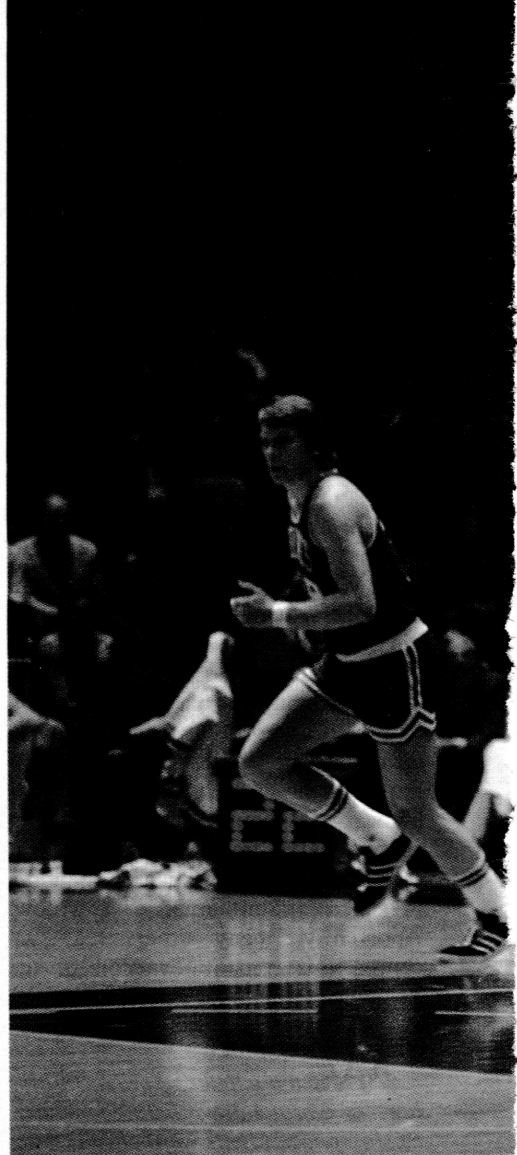
Their record of success can be found in the books. In the 26 years since a young coach named Arnold "Red" Auerbach came to Boston, the Celtics have won the championship of the National Basketball Association 13 times. In the reign of Bill Russell, surely the greatest defensive player in history and almost as surely the single most valuable player without qualification, the Celtics won 11 titles in 13 years—eight of them in a row. And as the 1976-77 season opens, they are champions again, for the second time in three years.

What the books do not report is that this success has come not from the expenditure of great wealth (until recent years the Celtics, even as cham-



pions, did not draw well at home) nor from the acquisition of a single flamboyant superstar (the Celtics have never, *never* had on their teams the league's leading scorer). It has come instead from the execution of a philosophy that has varied astonishingly little in 25 years. And despite all the efforts of commentators to turn sports into an excursion into advanced calculus, this Celtic philosophy can be captured by one word: run.

Run downcourt as soon as your defense captures the ball; run as the center, the man you depend on for the ball, turns to throw the long outlet pass; run with your men racing down the sidelines, filling the passing lanes, catching the defense off-guard; run



As coach, general manager Red Auerbach got the Celtics off and running years ago. They've never stopped.

with your best shooter trailing the play, ready for an easy jump shot as the other defenders try to match the speed of the Celtic fast break; run on defense to harass the ball handler, the shooter, to intercept the ball, to throw their offensive player off-guard.

If you want to understand the Celtic philosophy at work, try to take your eyes off the ball and watch one Celtic at a time. Watch Dave Cowens, the 6-8½ Celtic center, the red-headed insanity machine from Florida State University who was almost universally considered too small to play center against the giants such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Watch Cowens on defense as he leaves his position near the offensive center and suddenly jumps



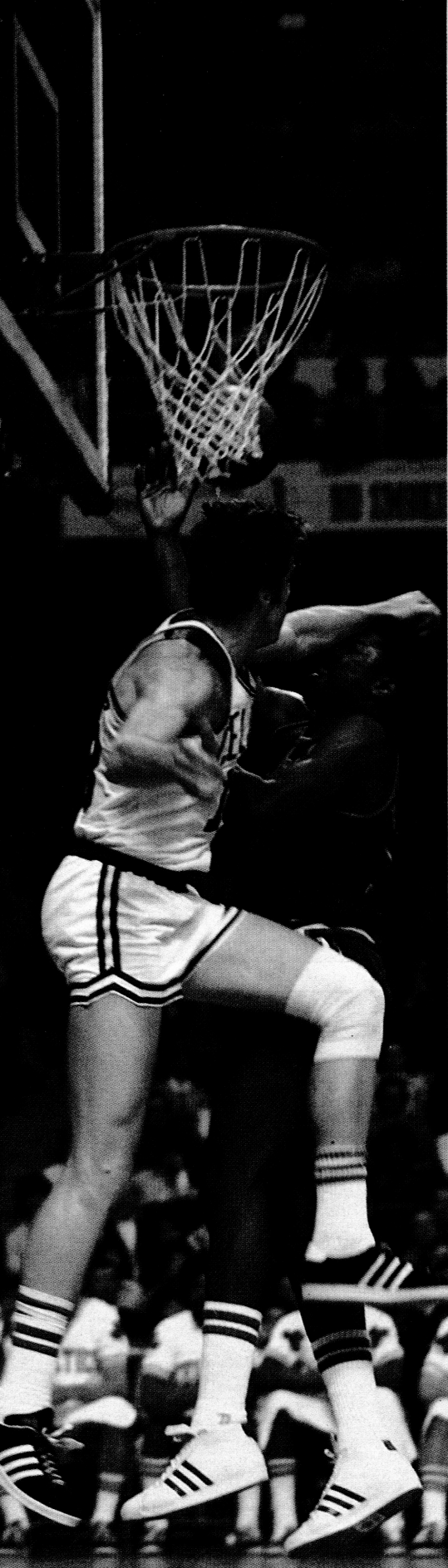
When JoJo White leads a break downcourt (above), it's basketball at its best. Coach Tom Heinsohn agrees.

out 10 to 15 feet to put a hand in the face of the shooting guard, then race across the width of the court to pick up the opposing center who was sure he had position. Watch Cowens leave his feet to dive headlong under the press table, onto the hardwood floor, to retrieve a loose ball when the Celtics had a 15-point lead in the closing moments of a game ("sure the game was out of reach," a fellow Celtic said, "but the ball wasn't").

Or watch John Havlicek, the 36-year-old who has been with Boston since 1962—that's not a typographical error—and who has gone from forward to guard, from reserve to starter to "sixth man" again with a steadiness and consistency that kept him out of the ranks of acknowledged superstars for more than a decade. Havlicek does nothing on the court with "style," unless you realize that his is the style

of results, therefore one of pure excellence. Watch Havlicek move, constantly move, running his younger opponents down in the course of a game, running from sideline to sideline, maneuvering behind picks and screens, looking for that one instant when he is open for the simple jump shot or layup that counts as much on the scoreboard as any of Julius Erving's twisting reverse slam dunks. Watch him with the ball, leading the fast-break by carrying the ball down the middle of the court, eyes looking for the open wing man, flicking back downcourt for an instant to find the trailer. It doesn't make for a spectacular piece of videotape or a magazine cover; but when it counts, as in the





incredible sixth game of the 1974 playoffs against Milwaukee, Havlicek's consistency fought Jabbar and the Bucks down to a last-second, double-overtime skyhook by the giant Jabbar to push the Celtics into a seventh game.

Or watch JoJo White, Boston's most frequent shooter, successor to the traditional "gunner" role held in turn by Bill Sharman, Tommy Heinsohn (now Celtic coach), Havlicek himself. In every Celtic team, characterized by pressure defense and fast-breaking, someone has to do the job of pressure shooting. And for White, whose face has the angular planes and the solemnity of ancient nobility, that job was never more difficult than during last year's championship finals against the underdog Phoenix Suns. The Suns had split the first four games with Boston, and the fifth was played in Phoenix, whose fans are considered the loudest and most enthusiastic (or aggressive, if you play for the visiting team) anywhere in the league. In that fifth game, already being called one of the most exciting in the history of professional basketball, Phoenix battled back again and again to extend the game into *triple* overtime. And again and again, as the Phoenix fans turned their arena into a madhouse, it was White whose shooting fought back the Phoenix determination and pulled the game, and probably the series, out for the Celtics.

When you watch these Celtics, when you watch the *team* play so at variance with other, more spectacularly talented but less cohesive teams, you begin to understand the extraordinary impact of Auerbach on the Celtic organization. His insistence on the fastbreak, pressure-defense style of play was a part of his personality 30 years ago when he began his coaching career in the then-new NBA with the Washington Capitols at the age of 30, with no college coaching experience at all. Auerbach stayed with that philoso-

Defensive terror Dave Cowens (left) went strangely AWOL last month. His absence could slow the Celts' running game to a mere trot.

phy for a decade without ever winning an NBA championship, until the arrival of Bill Russell and Tommy Heinsohn gave him the shooting-rebounding-defense combination he needed to put his philosophy into action. And his insistence on that philosophy now, as general manager and president of the Celtics, has given Boston a sense of continuity perhaps unequaled by any professional sports team.

The New York Yankees who won the pennant in 1976, for example, bear no relation to past Yankee dynasties. Running and scrappy play has replaced the one-time reliance on long-ball power. But the Celtics are still the Celtics; a Rip Van Winkle who spent 20 years asleep in the rafters of Boston Garden would find only the numbers different; the team is the same.

Consider how the Celtics preserve their style of play even with different personalities. In 1973, Boston acquired Paul Silas, a veteran of NBA teams which often played as though they needed two basketballs. But when he got to the Celtics from Phoenix, Silas used his remarkable rebounding skills to help Boston win its first title since the Russell years. And by agreeing to split playing time with the older, slower, but better-shooting Don Nelson, Silas subordinated ego to team, and in Nelson's words, "helped me play for two more years than I might have." In 1975, the Celtics got Charlie Scott from Phoenix who seemed to typify the give-me-the-ball-and-get-out-of-the-way style of many pro ballplayers. But in his first season, Scott split the backcourt duties brilliantly with White and was a key factor in the Celtics' latest championship.

Then, just before this current season started, Auerbach sent the holdout Silas off in a three-way deal which brought Boston forward Curtis Rowe to join newly acquired Sidney Wicks. In sum, three of the six key Celtics this year weren't even with the team 18 months ago; yet the team's style of play does not change.

Neither does Auerbach's insistence on a winning tradition. It comes with little things like a dress code, borrowed from the New York Yankees of

the McCarthy era (the manager, not the Senator), to remind the players of the tradition. Even during their losing seasons in the early Seventies, Auerbach recalled, "Havlicek and some of the other veterans complained to me that some of the rookies were dressing like hippie college freakouts. We don't enforce a code, but we have one; and you can see it affecting players as they stay here. When Cowens was out in the woods in Maine looking for some property, he stopped at a roadside restaurant before coming to an exhibition game to change his clothes and look better. It's a small thing, but it matters to them...to their pride."

And it comes with more significant factors, such as picking players imbued with a winning tradition. In the early Fifties, Auerbach went out of his way to pull in players from Adolph Rupp's Kentucky teams. Later, besides picking Bill Russell, Auerbach took a chance on K. C. Jones, Russell's teammate and roommate from the NCAA champion University of San Francisco. He took players whose college careers were spent in the shadow of more famous players from winning teams: Havlicek and Larry Sigfried came from the Ohio State team of Jerry Lucas; Don Chaney from the Houston team of Elvin Hayes.

As opponents look at the Celtics today, they will see in the frontcourt the reuniting of two forwards from the UCLA 1971 championship team. And in Curtis Rowe and Sidney Wicks, Auerbach has picked winners who have been denied the taste of championship play in the NBA—and thus players who shouldn't be as complacent as consistent playoff veterans. He has, in other words, recharged his team, made it younger and hungrier, without abandoning the basic values that have characterized the Celtics.

Perhaps the greatest tribute that can be paid them comes not from their own players or coach or front office personnel, but from their opponents. Houston's Mike Newlin, who faced Boston in an opening playoff round in 1975, said dazedly after a particularly brutal night, "You can't believe there's only five of them on the court. They just keep coming and coming and

coming." And Jim MacMillian, whose job at Los Angeles, Buffalo, and now New York has been to guard Havlicek, notes that "it isn't anything spectacular, nothing dazzling, just a jump shot, a layup, a freethrow, and then you look up and you see all the damage he's done and you can't believe it. The only way to play this guy—the only way to play the team—is to be aware of their ability and to deliberately go out and sacrifice yourself." And ex-Celtic Bill Sharman, former coach and now general manager of the Los Angeles Lakers, watched them beat his team last year and said with admiration, "It's five people who go out every night and who know exactly what they're doing and how to do it. It's absolutely simple basketball, stripped-down basketball, and it's the most difficult kind of basketball to play, because it all depends on execution—on determination. If anybody on the floor doesn't do his job, the whole game breaks down. But when they're all executing, it's the way basketball was meant to be played."

The Celtics face a difficult job this year. They have two new forwards, they have lost veteran Don Nelson to retirement and forward Paul Silas to contract holdout and ultimately to a trade with Denver and Detroit. They face in their division a Philadelphia 76er team that has in George McGinniss and Julius Erving two of the most spectacular figures in basketball. But this matchup has in it the historical echoes of other Celtic matchups. Twice in the Sixties, Boston had to face Philadelphia teams with the man regarded as the most awesome player of all time—Wilt Chamberlain. And only once did a Chamberlain team in Philly best Boston and go on to win the title. Later, Chamberlain joined Jerry West and Elgin Baylor in Los Angeles to form what was foreseen as a potential dynasty. But they *never* beat the Russell-era Celtics for the title. And in 1974, Boston had to

John Havlicek's gritty play has long typified Boston's winning style. At 36, his knee scarred from surgery, he may be in his final season.

regain the NBA title against the Milwaukee Bucks and a tall gentleman at center named Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

It sounds too much like a Hollywood plot outline to suggest that "Celtic Pride" has to be counted in assessing Boston's chances. But something besides players put them on top of the NBA and kept them there so long. Something helped them beat teams with stronger players and younger legs. So despite Philadelphia, despite the young and well-coached Golden State Warriors, despite the aggressive Phoenix Suns and the offensively awesome Buffalo Braves, the smart money this year will be on the same team it has been on for the last two decades. The smart money says that when this season is over, another championship banner will be hanging from the creaky rafters of that ancient building in Boston. ©

