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the sports issue

## The Game Changer

The Celtics have a long history of taking on players other teams doubted and winning championships with them. No wonder Kevin Garnett seems like such a good fit.



In Ray Allen (left), Kevin Garnett (middle), and Paul Pierce, the Celtics finally have a collection of stars. (Photo by Tanit Sakakini)

By Charles P. Pierce | October 7, 2007

Kevin Garnett always has been The Different One. Innovation is the reason he has a career at all, and he has built a great career in large part because he has kept faith in the same innovation that created the career in the first place. He was the first player in 20 years to enter the National Basketball Association directly out of high school, bypassing the lucrative festival of corruption that is the major college game. People around the NBA wanted him to fail so resoundingly that nobody else would dare try it. People around college basketball wanted him to fail so as to be less of a threat to their pool of cheap labor. He beat them all. He was an all-star by his second season. So it was hard to imagine that he could have been a better pro if he'd done an underpaid internship pumping up some college coach's ego and shoe contract.

He was a 6-11, 220-pound player who didn't want to play center. He wanted to play facing the basket, slashing past slower, bigger players for thundering dunks, or shooting flossy jump shots over them, and he managed to do that and still average almost 11 1/2 rebounds per game while developing a reputation as the kind of formidable defender that old-school centers were supposed to be. He refashioned his career in such a way as to change the way careers are made. Having done so, he refashioned his position in such a way as to change the way big men play the game. And, having done that, he refashioned the modern idea of the NBA superstar. He was "KG," or, less artfully, "The Big Ticket," but he was nobody's easy Bling-a-palooza prototype. He played his entire career in the quieter media precincts of Minnesota, where he was afflicted by the front-office clownery of Kevin McHale and, therefore, surrounded by teammates who never were quite good enough to get him all the way into the spotlight. There always was something Southern and reserved about him - an innate maturity that he

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used first to confound those people who'd thought he was too young to come into the league when he did. In all things, Kevin Garnett has confounded tradition. He's been the exception that refutes the rule.

Even the way Garnett came to the Celtics was different. When the notion was first bruited about, he was outspoken in his disapproval of the deal. When the five-for-one swap was finally consummated, Garnett was on a cruise. He would come here in his own good time. Since then, along with Ray Allen, who joined the Celtics earlier in the Summer of the Mercenaries, Garnett has revitalized the moribund franchise. According to the Celtics, they've sold 50 percent more season tickets since Garnett arrived. And no less a personage than NBA commissioner David Stern has said that having Garnett playing for a revived Celtics franchise was a boon to the league.

And he's right, of course. Garnett now shines the brightest in what the Celtics have suddenly become - a constellation in a star-struck league. Paul Pierce always was one of the NBA's stars, but he was surrounded by young, unproven players. So the team added Allen, a sweet shooter who will take some scoring pressure off Pierce. Garnett, however, is a game changer. By his very presence, he makes Allen even more of a shooting threat and amplifies Pierce's ability to slash to the basket.

Because he confounds tradition, Garnett is deeply rooted in the deepest Celtics tradition of all - innovation itself. They were the first NBA team to integrate. The first to hire a black head coach. They always took chances on players who didn't fit any mold. Nobody in the NBA wanted Bob Cousy because he was a "showboat" who passed behind his back. The Celtics took him. Nobody wanted Bill Russell because he was a 6-9 center who couldn't shoot. The Celtics took him, and they won 11 NBA titles in the next 13 years. The league passed on Dave Cowens because, like Garnett, he was a center who didn't play like one. The Celtics took him and won two more championships. Larry Bird was slow and white. Kevin McHale was clumsy. Robert Parish was an underachiever, and Dennis Johnson was a malcontent. The Celtics took them all, and they helped bring the entire NBA back from the dead. Kevin Garnett is of a piece with that history. In that, he's not so different at all.■

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