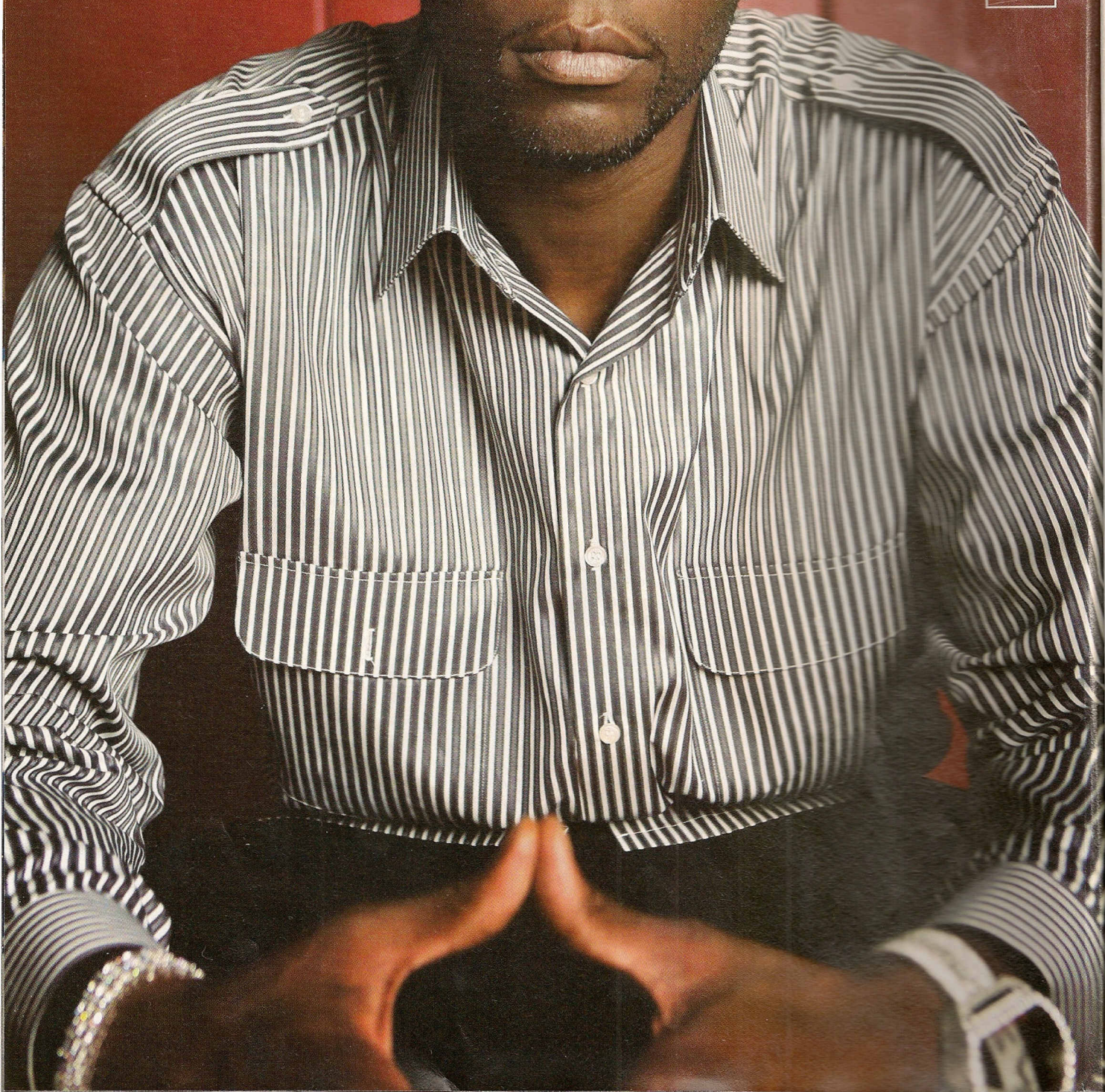


Movin' On Up



Al Jefferson has been out-sight, out-of-mind for the better part of the last two seasons. Now, the 24-year old who many think is the best offensive big man in the NBA, is poised to lead the Minnesota Timberwolves out of the darkness.

No doubt about it, Al Jefferson's garage screams "NBA Star." There's the 2009 Bentley Coupe he just copped earlier this summer. He lives in Minnesota, so of course he's got a Range Rover and an H1 Hummer at his disposal to help him navigate through those miserable winter snow storms. And soon, a pimped-out '85 Chevy Caprice will join Big Al's growing fleet of rides.

"That was the very first car I ever bought in 10th grade," says Jefferson, a native of Prentiss, Mississippi. "I found the exact same one and I put a lot of work into it. It's good to get it back, fix it up like I wish I would have had it back then."

On top of the cars, he also just purchased a boat, which sits on the lakeside dock behind his gargantuan five-bedroom house that was once occupied by former Minnesota Twins pitcher Johan Santana. The toys, the whips, the cribs – this is what happens when you are one of the game's most dominant big men (6-10, 260). Al's repertoire of ambidextrous post moves and the ability to get 20 and 10 every night are just a few of the reasons why the Timberwolves inked him to a five-year, \$65 million contract before the '08-09 season.

But despite reaching baller status with his bank account, to the mainstream

basketball public, Al Jefferson stays relatively incognito compared to other NBA stars. Between playing for the post-Garnett Timberwolves and missing half of last season due to injury, it seems as if he's been off the radar ever since he left Boston as part of the KG trade two years ago. As this issue went to print, Jefferson wasn't a part of any national endorsement campaigns. You won't catch him on TMZ or as a guest on "Regis and Kelly." Even in strictly sports circles, his name attracts only tepid interest at best. For Jefferson, the celebrity status is meaningless.

"I believe in 'out of sight, out of mind,'" says Jefferson in his thick southern accent. "I kind of like to stay to myself. I'm just a homebody. I like to stay in the big pretty house I got."

Jefferson might be cool with his anonymity, but it's not going to last. Surrounded by a rejuvenated, young, up-tempo squad, and a new coach who promises to run the offense through his young big man, Al Jefferson is set to put the basketball world on notice.

Unlike other NBA players who go home for the summer or train in hot spots like Vegas, L.A., Houston, or Chicago, you'll find Jefferson staying right there in Minneapolis in the offseason. Aside from a quick

trip back home to Prentiss and maybe a little vacation here and there, he's at the Target Center putting in work on a daily basis; sticking to a routine he's kept since his second year in the league.

"After I had a pretty good rookie season in Boston, I went home and I relaxed," says Jefferson. "And I remember my first day of training camp, I twisted my ankle. Doc Rivers [Jefferson's coach in Boston] said, 'I don't think you worked hard this offseason.' And ever since then, I stayed with the team over the summers and dedicated my time." The Celtics drafted Al 15th overall out of Prentiss High School in 2004. At Prentiss, Jefferson put up Wilt Chamberlain-like digits – 42.6 points, 18 rebounds and seven blocks per game before being named Mr. Basketball in Mississippi and a McDonald's All-American. Coach Rivers knew he had a special talent in Jefferson. But being a raw player out of high school, Doc knew Al had yet developed the discipline to become great.

"I don't know if he needed babysitting, but he just needed to be pushed," says Rivers. "I looked at his potential and how he good he can be and I didn't want Al to settle."

The summer after his second season, Jefferson basically lived inside the Celtics' practice facility. He would spend hours on end in the weight room and on the

court honing his post game: left-hand hooks, drop-step moves, 13-foot jumpers. Over and over and over again. As his third season wrapped, the results showed. He saw his numbers blow up from 7.9 ppg, 5.1 rpg and 0.8 bpg in his second year, to 16 points, 11 boards and 1.5 blocks in his third.

"I have to say he's a workaholic," says Wolves teammate Ryan Gomes, who also played with Jefferson in Boston. "He works extremely hard in the offseason, especially on that block. That's why he's a top-five scorer in the paint."

ern day big that launches threes and dribbles up the court. Jefferson is strictly old-school.

"I think of him as a baby Moses Malone," says Gary Payton, a teammates with Jefferson during his rookie year in Boston. "He will continue to improve his game and get better with the work he puts in."

Jefferson started the '08-09 season on a tear. He put 38 and 16 on Memphis in a home game back in December. He ate up Yao for 36 and 22 in Houston. The biggest and most controversial All-Star snub when

stature complimented with the little scowl he wears on his face. Catch him smiling on the court? You have a better chance trying to dunk on him.

"A lot of people say to me that I look so mean because I never smile," says Jefferson. "But I'm a really nice guy. I'm a funny guy and if you're around me, you're going to laugh and have a good time with me."

While I didn't expect him to be mean or cold by any means, I did anticipate him being shy and somewhat standoffish prior to interviewing him for this story. How

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-- Gary Payton

While the Celtics weren't ignorant to Jefferson's upside, they still shipped him off to Minnesota in the summer of 2007, as part of the blockbuster trade that brought Kevin Garnett to Boston—a move that would help bring Boston a chip that next season. But while KG was basking in the national spotlight in Beantown, Jefferson was quietly developing into a star. Almost immediately after arriving in the Twin Cities, Kevin McHale—the Wolves' GM at the time—took Al under his wing. Even before McHale took over as head coach in December 2008, you would routinely find him working on post moves with Jefferson before games and after practices.

"Kevin McHale, he was great. I learned a lot about him before I even met him," says Jefferson. "A lot of people in Boston started comparing me to him so when I got traded here, I was just like, 'I'm going to be like a sponge on this guy. I'm just going to just suck all the information that I possibly can out of him.'"

For Jefferson to shadow a player from the '80s is fitting. He doesn't have the jaw-dropping athleticism that Dwight Howard has, nor does he fit the mold of the mod-

the teams were announced, Big Al was averaging 23.1 points, 11 rebounds and 1.7 blocks per contest before he was forced to shut it down for the year after tearing his ACL in a Feb. 8 game against New Orleans. Mainstream America might still be oblivious to Jefferson, but his colleagues respect his skill set. It's nearly impossible to find someone around the league who won't rave about Big Al's game.

"I like Al Jefferson. He's got so much touch and moves around the rim," says two-time All-Star Elton Brand. "When he got to Minnesota and became the focal point of that team, he really exploded. He just has so much upside."

"I remember playing him in high school and he just dominated me," says Greg Oden. "He's got such big hands, he can do a lot of stuff with the ball and it makes him that much tougher to guard. He's twisting and spinning on you, and the whole time he's holding the ball like an apple."

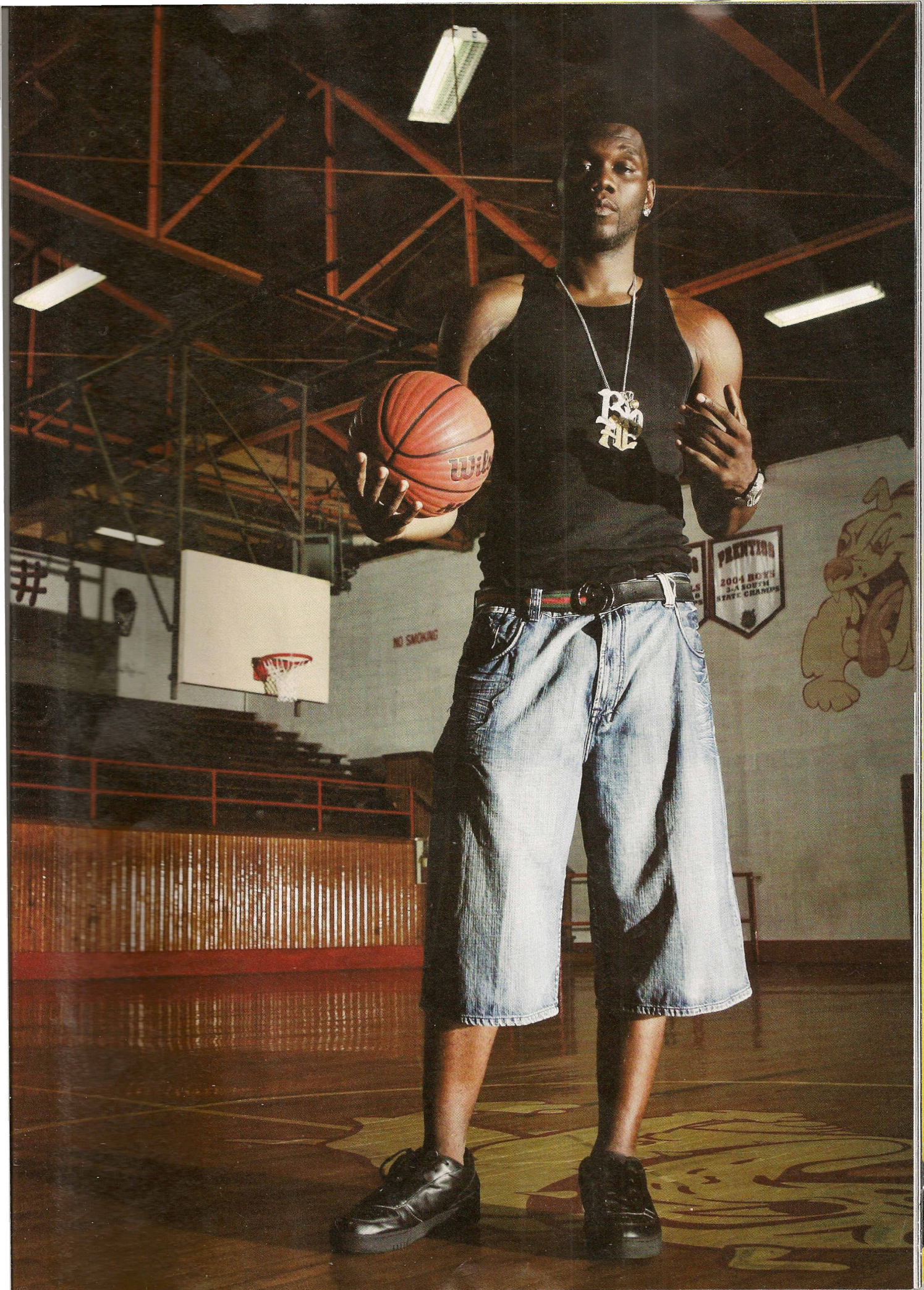
If you have never spoken to Al Jefferson, you will definitely be caught off-guard a little bit. When he steps between the lines, he's somewhat intimidating with his large

often do you see him interviewed? What I found was a personable guy. Someone who laughs easily and who's sentences rarely found periods.

"Especially coming from a small town in Mississippi, you wouldn't think he'd be so funny and outgoing," says Gomes. "Being from an area that doesn't have a lot of people. Once you get to know him, he stands out a lot. He's a great person also."

Jefferson is a big movie buff and is seen around the locker room doing Bernie Mac and Scarface impersonations. Ask him a question and he'll recite a line from a movie as an answer. He's as goofy and playful with his teammates as he is with kids and just about everyone else. One T-Wolves employee told us that Al will walk up to them and act all mad and like a tough guy, then will burst out in his signature deep-toned laugh.

"There's people in everyone's life when they walk into a room, the room lights up," says Rivers. "Al's a light-up-the-room guy. When you see Al, it brings a smile to your face. I know that his teammates would say that about him, too."







So Ricky Rubio isn't showing up in Minneapolis anytime soon. And McHale, Al's mentor and coach in Minnesota, parted ways with the organization over the summer and has been replaced by former Lakers assistant Kurt Rambis. If the Wolves are going to make noise anytime soon, the burden now rests on Big Al's shoulders.

Jefferson will have some help though. With guys like Kevin Love, Jonny Flynn, Wayne Ellington and Corey Brewer, the Wolves have one of the league's best young cores. Like Al, second-year pro Love is one of the most fundamentally sound big men in the game. Together, the duo has potential to form one of the best frontcourts the game today - a latter-day McHale and Robert Parish.

"Hopefully we'll be better [than Parish and McHale] because Kevin Love is something special," says Jefferson. "I never tell him this to his face, so he probably thinks I think he's the worst

player to ever play in the game, but he's very special. With me and him beside each other we can just grow up together in this league. I think we'll be big someday soon."

With Shaq out East this year and Yao most likely shelved for the season due to injury, this could be the year Jefferson also moves on up to the NBA All-Star stage. It's an accolade Al knows will come.

"It has nothing to do with me, my numbers or how good I can score and rebound," says Jefferson. "It's all about winning. If you win 23 games a year, you don't deserve to be an All-Star. But if we win 35, 40 games, then they can't deny me."

"I think Al can be an All-Star every year," adds Payton. "No one can hold Al on the block. With Kurt Rambis as head coach in Minnesota now, I think Al will get the ball and be the go-to guy for the Timberwolves."

While experts, the media, fans and even management see the T-Wolves as a three

or four-year project, Jefferson wants to seize the moment today.

"For me I just don't look at it like that," Jefferson says in the first serious tone of the interview. "I feel like we can turn things around as soon as possible. You can look at Portland, because two years ago nobody was talking about them. They weren't even a playoff team, you know what I'm saying? And I just feel it doesn't have anything to do with how many years we've been together because we could be here for six years and still not win."

Jefferson then pauses for a moment to gather his thoughts. A second or two later, he goes on and makes a statement that proves he is ready to go from the naïve high school kid from Nowhere, USA, to a leader on the cusp of becoming a household name.

"I'm 24 years old and the way time goes by, I'll be 28, 29," says Jefferson. "This doesn't last forever, so if you're going to do it, you better do it now."