

Strength coach Mick Smith helps Howard and his teammates prepare for the battles ahead.

Muscling Up

By Scott Wallin



If you hear words of praise come from Mick Smith, you can believe they've been earned and that they're truthful.

Smith sometimes has to shake his head when reading about certain weight room "accomplishments" or body fat claims being made of other athletes.

"A lot of times you read things and you think, 'That's impossible,'" says Smith, the Magic's assistant basketball coach for strength and conditioning. "If it comes out of my mouth, I'm not bragging for the guy. I don't give guys anything."



So when Smith says that power forward Dwight Howard has added 25 pounds of muscle and increased his body fat by only 1 percent in doing so, you better believe it's fact and not hoops hoopla.

Howard last year checked in as a 240-pound rookie straight out of high school. But at the start of this year's training camp, he returned as a much more chiseled and veteran-looking 265 pounds. It's Smith's job to maintain and enhance the Magic's prized work of art and he wasted little time getting busy after last season.

Once the final horn sounded, Smith allowed a couple of weeks of recovery for Howard and his teammates. But then it was time to focus on getting bodies stronger for another physically demanding NBA season.

Smith designed workout and conditioning plans for every player and stayed in communications with each of them to make sure they followed it as prescribed. He visited some players in their hometowns and with others who live in Central Florida. For Hedo Turkoglu and Mario Kasun, who were back in Europe, Smith relied on e-mail.

Howard, considered the future -- if not the present -- cornerstone of this franchise, drew special attention from Smith. They met at Howard's home in Atlanta three times and had other visits in Orlando to make sure the off-season plan was in full swing.

"This year, Dwight was one of the guys we really wanted to focus on," Smith said. "It was difficult because he had so many obligations with the NBA, a lot of traveling. We were still able to get his strength levels to where they need to be."

Smith has seen considerable leaps in Howard's strength from when the team drafted him June 24, 2004. At that time, Howard could bench-press 225 pounds. He now can do eight repetitions of that weight and is at a max of 275 pounds.

But, Smith is quick to mention, "he's still a work in progress" and that progress is not achieved overnight.

"It's just a matter of time," Smith said. "We know that he's still young. We still need to get him stronger. It takes time."

The biggest area of focus is on Howard's lower body to help give him an even stronger foundation for the big-man battles in the paint. Smith has Howard doing squats, power cleans and several "Olympic movements" that will develop strength in his hips and legs.

"All last year, we made sure he knew how to do them [the exercises] properly," Smith said. "We didn't really work on a lot of heavy weights. Now, we're trying to get his technique back and then work harder as we go."

Once the season begins, all Magic players work out with weights twice a week. Smith said Howard and the team's other post players will add a third day of lifting during weeks when the schedule is lighter.

But the Howard growth plan isn't all about pumping iron. Smith offers constant reminders about maintaining healthy eating habits, and Howard has even hired a personal chef to assure his nutritional goals are being met. Beyond that, Smith provides basic supplements, protein shakes and other healthy beverages as grab-and-go necessities for Howard on his way out the door. After all, a growing star has to stay well nourished.

"I told him that it's a job to eat, it's a job to not skip meals," Smith said.

Smith's messages to Howard and the others has been especially reinforced since the return of Bo Outlaw, who is living proof of the benefits of physical conditioning and nutrition.

"Bo is like my assistant," Smith said. "Bo believes in my program and he backs me 100 percent. He says to Dwight, 'Come on, young fella, listen to Mick. He's telling you right.' Bo's a positive influence for everyone on the team, especially the young guys like Dwight. I'm really happy to have Bo back."