

THE MOST IMPORTANT
PLAYER OF THE LAST DECADE

DIKEMBE MUTOMBO HERO TO MILLIONS

WORDS: BRIAN DUFF & TOM MINEAR
IMAGES: GETTY / NBA

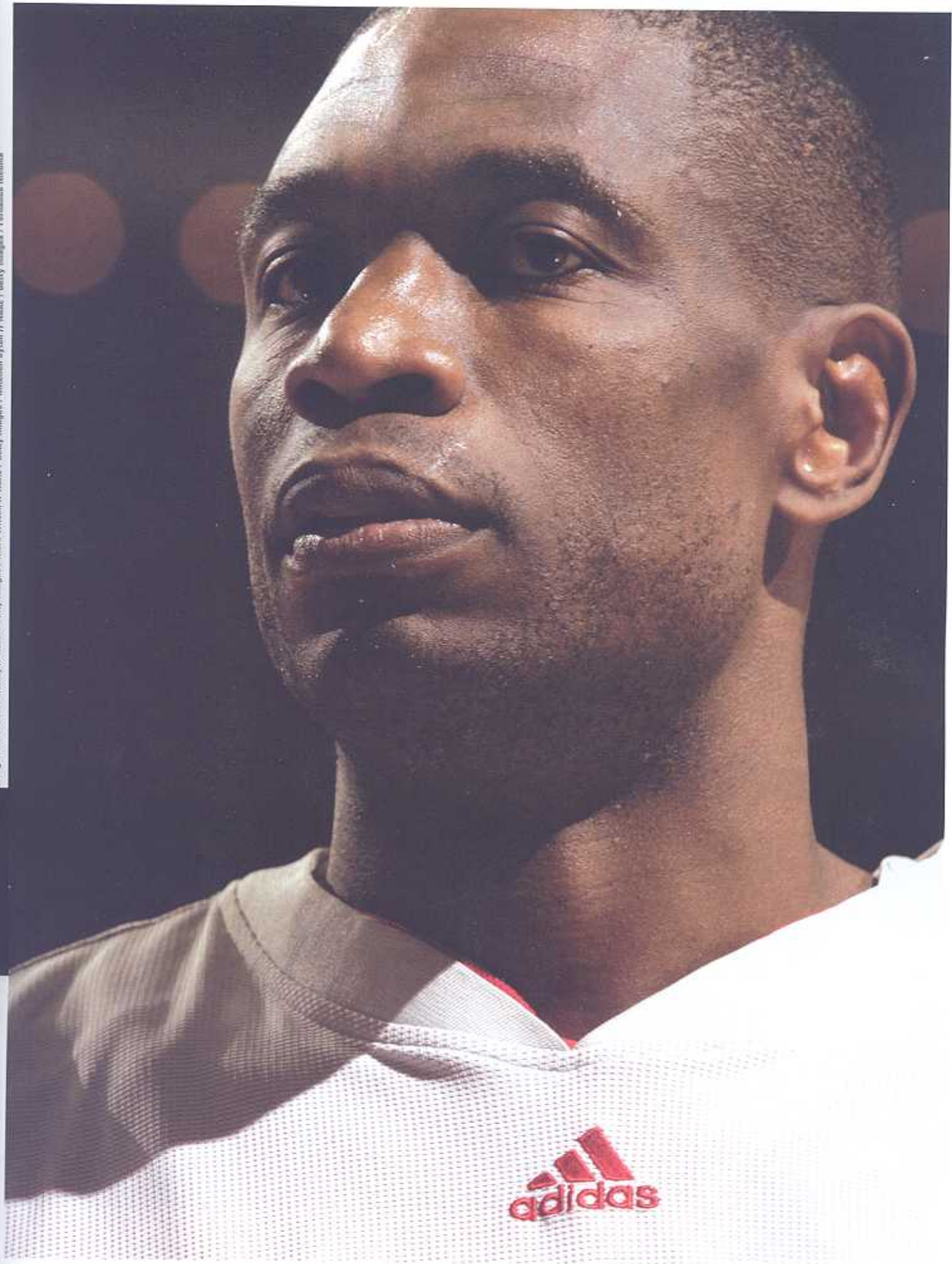


Dikembe Mutombo Mpolondo Mukamba Jean Jacque Wamutombo is hardly a forgettable name, but it is one that is frustratingly and frequently omitted from debates on the greatest players of the current generation. High scorers get a start (Kobe Bryant, Allen Iverson), as do great distributors (Steve Nash, Jason Kidd) and other powerful big men (Tim Duncan, Shaquille O'Neal), but even at 7'2", 280 pounds, Mutombo is the overlooked superstar. His eight All-Star appearances, four Defensive Player of the Year awards and prodigious, generation defining shot blocking seem to have faded from the shared consciousness as fans continue their task of finding the Next Big Thing. So it was strangely fitting that US President George W. Bush – hardly an arbitrator of basketball, or goodness for that matter – took it upon himself to pay homage to the centre from the

Democratic Republic of Congo on his biggest stage: the annual State of the Union address, calling him a "son of the Congo", and an American citizen he is proud to have in his country.

Of course, the president could hardly have been swayed by a blocked shot or a timely rebound; rather it is Mutombo's latter day career as a UNICEF and NBA Cares ambassador that drew W's attention. One of the most intimidating players in recent memory, Deke has established himself as a bastion of charity and due diligence off the court, raising money through his Dikembe Mutombo Foundation and posing change on the ground in Africa. He has poured millions of his own dollars, earned on the hardwood and the training room, into his various projects – a sacrifice that even the most cold-hearted cynic must look upon with admiration.

to right: NBA Photos Library // NBAE / Getty Images / Mark Wilson // NBAE / Getty Images / Mitchell Aymon // NBAE / Getty Images / Fernando Medina





Clockwise from top: NBA Photos Library // NBAE // Getty Images / Terrance Vaccaro // NBAE // Getty Images / Catherine Steenkiste // NBAE // Getty Images // NBAE // Bill Baptist // NBAE // Getty Images // Catherine Steenkiste

Ever humble, his breath catches when he attempts to answer why he has been so willing to commit his personal fortune to healing Africa. "Even if I have contributed a million or two or five," he starts, his harmonic African diction sounding almost angry in his urgency to explain himself, "it was only to show people that I am so very committed." He pauses and considers what he has said. He hears a flaw in the logic he has laid out and attempts to clarify. "I want people to see that so they will be inspired to go out and be part of the work that we have been doing. I want to see a result! I want to be part of the work, not just by donating money."

His voice has been gravelly and ageless since he entered the league, and remains so. In fact, physically, he seems to have aged very little, if at all, during his 15-year NBA odyssey. Staggeringly adult, standing with Commissioner David Stern in 1991 – when he was drafted ahead of sure-fire picks such as Michigan State University's Steve Smith and the University of Arizona's Brian Williams – Mutombo was a man-child before he became a man, and remains such a confronting physical specimen that it is strange to hear the quiet humility in his voice. Past his trademark finger-wagging and beyond his granite shoulders is a man on a mission of peace and wellness.

At 40-years-old, Mutombo has spent the last three seasons with the Houston Rockets, tutoring Yao Ming – surely a beneficiary of his boundary-snapping entrance into the league – and even took over from the Chinese national at the starting centre position when the injury bug struck and the team found itself in dire straits. Mutombo's decade and a half in the NBA's trenches have seen a massive change in the structure of the league. Gone are the days of four-year college commitments when the league was almost exclusively American in its composition. Today, dozens of foreign-born players make up teams' rosters, and the African influx – while not as copious as the European invasion – has been well and truly felt. "If you asked me 15 years ago how many African basketball players were in the league, I would have said there are about three of us; me, Hakeem Olajuwon and Manute Bol," he remembers. "Today there are 20-some players from Africa in the league. That was my goal coming in, and I think I've succeeded, but I want more."

Amongst the Africans onboard are stars of tomorrow like Ike Diogu, a Nigerian playing for the Indiana Pacers (who President of Basketball Operations Larry Bird labelled the "gem of the deal" that sent away stars Stephen Jackson and Al Harrington), Pape Sow of the Toronto Raptors and DeSangana Diop of the Dallas Mavericks, both from Senegal. Africa also boasts the number one draft choice of 1998, Michael Olowokandi of Nigeria, and one of the most exciting players in the league today, in the form of Luol Deng, of the Sudan, by way of Egypt and England.

With a renewed Tracy McGrady feeding him down low, Mutombo led the Rockets to a 20-12 record sans Yao, and locked the squad into a playoff berth. His 33 games as a starter provided the anchor for the defence-oriented squad, and his ability to clean the glass was vital on the relatively undersized team. His 22-rebound explosion against the Denver Nuggets in January was testament to Mutombo's amazing physical and mental state and, of course, his blocking was as sharp as ever as he swatted 48 shots during his stint as starting centre, including five blocks against the Lakers in January. It was that performance that took him past Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on the list of the greatest shot-blockers in history – although several hundred still separate him from leader Hakeem Olajuwon. His effort confirmed his status as one of the all-time greats on the dirty end of the timber and he'll retire ahead of household names like Tim Duncan, Shaquille O'Neal, David Robinson and Moses Malone. Because of his work ethic and dedication to basketball over a nation-trotting 1148-game career, his place is thoroughly deserved and will stand the test of time.

Still, it's less the blocks themselves than the finger-wagging that lodges Deke in the public's imagination. Starting at the end of his days in Denver (where the crowd had nicknamed him "Mount Mutombo"), any time someone would attempt to pop a shot over him, he would emphatically deny them, waving a single finger as if to say: "not in my house!" Fans love it, and the Denver faithful were well known for their complimentary wagging, building a sense of expectation for Mutombo to fulfil after every shot. But by 1999, the wag had drawn the ire of coaches and players, and the league effectively banned it. Mutombo, ever obedient, crowed to the commissioner, got a "no way", and settled down to block shots without the infectious after-effect.

In 2002, opinion shifted again when the big man's New York Knicks "were playing against the New Jersey Nets and I blocked 11 shots in the game," he remembers. "The fans kept waving their finger at me in the stands, so I said: 'I got to bring it back.' I told the league office: 'You can fine me,' but a referee said if I didn't do it in a guy's face, I would be okay, so I started wagging my finger to the fans."

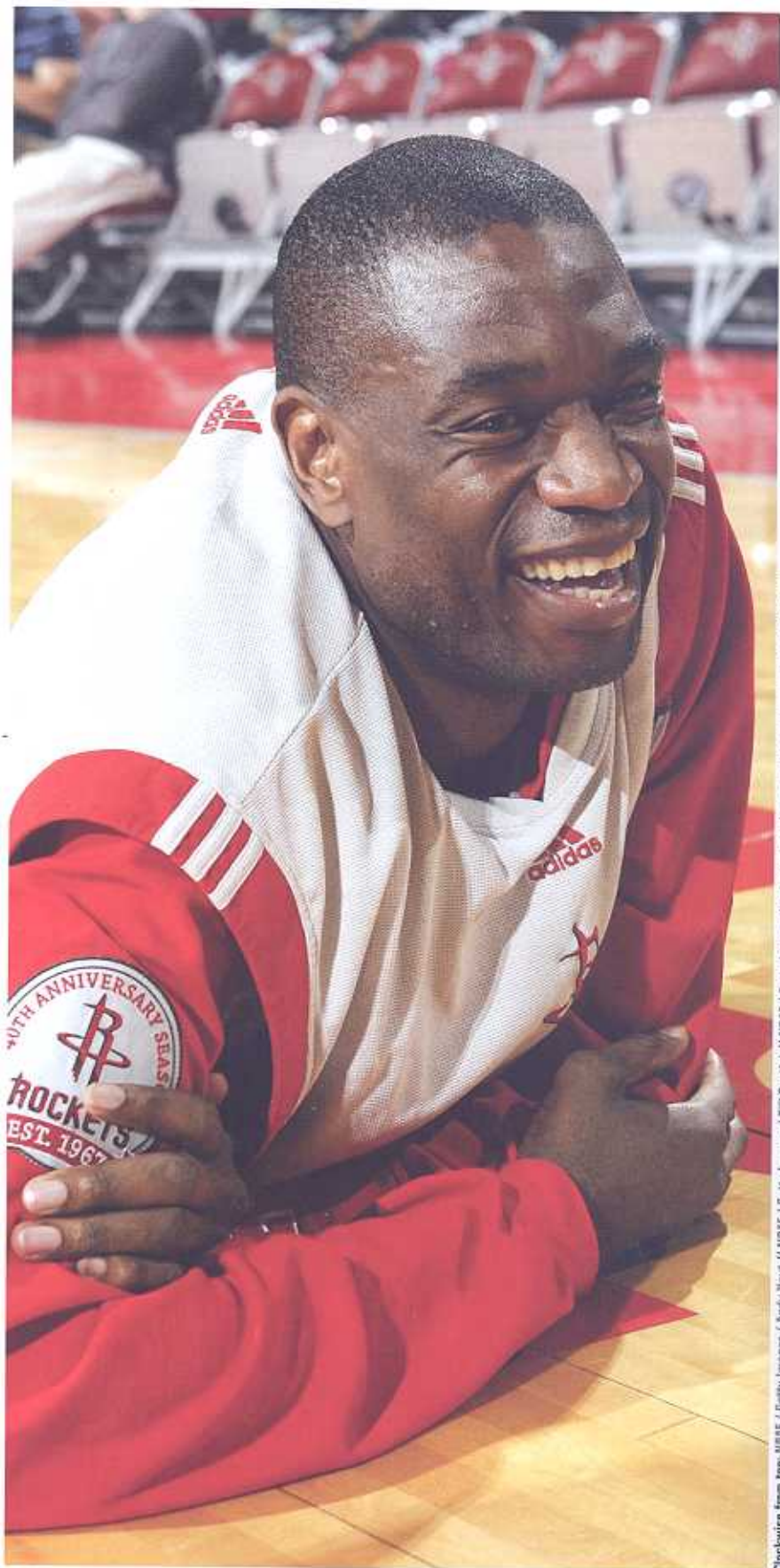
"It's funny, man," said Kirk Snyder, now a teammate on the Rockets, of his first block by Mutombo. "You almost wanted to get your shot blocked just to see him do it. That's the longest finger that I've ever seen."

As well as pleasing the crowds, Mutombo's finger wag is symbolic of the player he has become on the court: passionate, intimidating and beloved. These are qualities that have been apparent, even in his early days with the Georgetown University Hoyas. Arriving in Washington DC in 1987 as a student of medicine, he was determined to work hard in his studies, get his degree and head back to Africa to treat the illnesses that were, and are, ravaging the continent. Plans changed when legendary coach John Thompson – one can imagine with great passion – asked the hulking African to join the school's storied basketball program. Mutombo had played for Zaire's junior national team and, unbeknownst to him, scouting tapes had ended up in Thompson's office. Georgetown – one of the finest universities in the country – had ended up with a basketball prodigy when it brought over the burgeoning doctor.

"...his generosity has been widespread, the first major contribution coming in 1996 when he paid for the Zaire female basketball team to travel to Atlanta to play at the Olympics."

"I went to Georgetown on an exchange program for medicine," Mutombo remembers. "When I arrived I was asked if I would join the basketball team, so that's what I did." Although he eventually majored in linguistics and diplomacy, he kept a passing interest in immunology and pathology – especially as they related the communicable diseases in Africa. "I never forgot my love for medicine, and that's why I'm doing what I'm doing," he claims. He has been building a hospital in Kinshasa, named after his mother, and when it opened early this year, the \$29 million facility became the first built in the capital city in nearly 40 years, since the hale and hearty early days of independence. During his life, the DRC – called, variously, Zaire and the Republic of Congo – has only seen a handful of leaders, and the legacy of its long time kleptocratic, Europhilic leader Mobutu Sese Seko still hangs over the country. Mutombo has brought a breath of modernity to the world of Congolese medicine. "My hospital is named after my mom, and it is for her," he says gently. "It is because my family means a lot to me that I built it, but I wasn't really doing this for my mom. I was doing it because I just got sick and tired of seeing how people were dying in the Congo."

At Georgetown, Mutombo had to dominate the basketball court first to get his chance to save the world. While the rest of college ball was slow to catch on – Basketball Times Magazine listed the centre as a 5'10" point guard – Thompson knew what he had, and kept the big man behind future NBA star Alonzo Mourning, honing his game and working on his fitness and skill sets. While his offence needed work, even then Mutombo's eye for defence was extraordinary. With his limited



Clockwise from top: NBAE / Getty Images / Andy Hoyt // NBAE / Getty Images / Bill Baptist // NBAE / Getty Images / Rucky Vidmar // NBAE / Getty Images / Nathaniel S. Butler

experience, he was never schooled on defensive manoeuvring and would stay grounded while opponents faked and baulked, timing his one and only jump to swat their shot. Although playing only 11 minutes per game, he shot a mind-boggling 70.6 percent from the field and blocked 75 shots in just 33 games – including an NCAA-record 12 blocks in one stunning display against St. John's University – and the Hoyas' crowds soon fell in love with their new centre, nicknaming the Mourning/Mutombo combination "Rejection Row". His growth as a basketballer was impressive, as he started 24 of 31 games in his second season and averaged a double-double with four blocks per. He was named to the Big East First-Team and became the Hoyas' leader at both ends of the floor when Mourning went down with an injury. He finished his final college season with averages of 15 points, 12 rebounds, five blocks and two assists and an indelible label as "the next Hakeem Olajuwon". The Nuggets snared him with the fourth pick in the 1991 draft, and his NBA career since has been nothing but spectacular.

Mutombo immediately established himself as the go-to guy in Denver, starting every game he played and finishing the year on the All-Rookie First Team and as an All-Star – the first of eight appearances in the NBA's showcase game. His numbers were exceptional, with averages of 16.6 points, 12.3 rebounds, 2.2 assists and three blocks. The Nuggets gradually improved, reaching the playoffs in 1994, and coming up against juggernaut Seattle SuperSonics, led by Gary Payton and Shawn Kemp and boasting a franchise-best 63 wins. While no eight-seed had ever trumped a top-seeded opponent, that's exactly what happened against the Supes. Down 2-0 in the best of five series, the Nugs rallied with a 110-93 pounding of Seattle in game three and a dramatic overtime win in game four. In the fifth and deciding game, Denver topped out at the buzzer of the first overtime by four. Mutombo, predictably, grabbed the last rebound of the night, and collapsed under the weight of his teammates, securing one of the great upsets in history. In fact, in this issue, handle rated that series as the second-greatest upset ever, just behind this year's thrilling Golden State-over-Dallas shocker. The run could not last, unfortunately, and the courageous Nuggets bowed to Utah in seven games in the second round. Mutombo averaged a double-double in the two post-season series', and racked an unbeatable 5.8 blocks per game.

Mutombo continued to own the paint after he left Denver, posting double-doubles during his time with the Atlanta Hawks, the Philadelphia 76ers, the New Jersey Nets, the New York Knicks and the Houston Rockets, and taking four Defensive Player of the Year awards. In 2000-2001, he became only the sixth player to win back-to-back rebounding titles and, in 2003, finally made it to the finals with the Nets. Settling in Houston, his game has lacked the flair and aggression of the halcyon days of his youth, but there has often been that old spark of intimidation, especially in the play of pet-project Yao and the hard-nosed Rockets team.

An ugly heckling incident came close to prematurely ending the big man's career last year as a fan, during an exhibition match against the Orlando Magic, abused Deke, calling him a "big monkey". Mutombo cracked and threatened to go into the stands if it ever happened again. Later, he cooled down and graciously accepted the man's apology, letting the heckle speak for itself: a racist arrow fired by ignorance that Mutombo wore with trademark dignity. In many ways, that barb is a microcosm for Mutombo's life: he has let no hardship or difficulties stand in his way, and has used his own resilience and professionalism to show the world how to grow stronger.

Born one of ten in Kinshasa, Mutombo's childhood was scarred with political turmoil and confronted with a depth of poverty that his teammates and fans could never truly understand. Even before he left Africa, HIV/AIDS was an enormous struggle and, in his own estimate, he contracted "malaria a thousand times when I was young." His exaggeration is purposeful, as he knows he was lucky to escape the disease unscathed, especially because he caught it again "during a trip when I was already in the league," he remembers. "My Foundation wants to educate people and find a way in which we can stay malaria-free while at the same time help all these companies that are trying to find a cure. Malaria is killing every few seconds in Africa and no one is talking about them." The disease is relatively easy to prevent, given proper equipment and medication, and it joins a list in Mutombo's mind with tuberculosis and AIDS as "diseases of the poor that have begun to destroy the fabric of society in Africa." His tone turns to grief when he says: "Whenever a village or a family is destroyed, it is the story of Africa. When you go to a

place where there should be ten villages, and you don't find them, it's because they are gone forever. Fifty percent of the people living in Africa are under the age of 15 and are in grave danger if we don't find the solution. I want to be part of the solution."

Through all the turmoil in his country, Mutombo could see at a young age that he had a chance to make a difference. He was given a proper education at a Salvation Army school, where he learnt about history, religion and society and knew himself to be lucky to have ample food and shelter. He went to university on a USAID scholarship and kept the Congo at the forefront of his mind, even while he was becoming a superior basketball player. One of his first acts upon entering the NBA was to become an ambassador for CARE, an international relief agency, which took him back to Africa in 1993 with Commissioner Stern and Georgetown alumni Alonzo Mourning and Patrick Ewing. They visited Somali refugee camps in Kenya and trouble spots in South Africa, forecasting the rise of the NBA Cares international wing, and its ties to UNICEF and UNAIDS, as well as his creation of the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation at the age of 30. "I am an ambassador for UNICEF regarding the fights against AIDS and malaria and for vaccinations," he states in the clear, concise vernacular of an aid worker. "We are trying to treat children with the polio vaccine and last year vaccinated more than 20 million people. We have a chance to rid the world – or at least reduce the mortality in Africa – of the infection and, although times are hard right now, we are trying to set an example."

UNICEF's Executive Director Ann Veneman is a bit more expansive on his involvement, noting first, in good humour, that Mutombo is "really, really tall." She is also keen to tell the world that he is "a very impressive, committed individual who wants to give back, and understands his own roots and the country that he's come from," she enthuses. "He understands the kinds of issues the people in Africa face and I am impressed with his desire to make a difference and willingness to spend his own money. There are other celebrity-types that invest in the developing world, but I think his story is somewhat unique because he comes from a developing country. When somebody visits these countries, they garner publicity in that country, but also bring the message back to the developed world. He's been a really great role model for everyone."

Onboard is, importantly, the NBA. "The league has so many programs," Mutombo says. "Our players really do care about the issues in the world today: we care about HIV/AIDS; we care about malaria; we care about the poverty; we care about housing and other social problems; we care about literacy; and we care about young people who are not getting a chance. When people look at us and think that we've just made money playing the game of basketball, our players are trying to be seen doing this important work. We're not just a bunch of millionaires, but a group of human beings working day and night to be part of the wider world. We are Basketball Without Borders!"

His speech is impassioned and fierce, and wholly the sort of devotion that one would expect, based on the way he plays basketball. It is at once pleasing and disorienting to here Dikembe Mutombo speak about literacy and disease and imagine his finger waving like some sort of hackneyed metaphor: "Not in my house!"

When looking at Mutombo's charitable work over the last twenty years, it is hard not to be amazed. Professional athletes are not known for their worldliness, or for their philanthropic largess, but his generosity has been widespread, the first major contribution coming in 1996 when he paid for the Zaire female basketball team to travel to Atlanta to play at the Olympics. He has worked with the ONE Campaign with Bono to "Make Poverty History" and has taken on many roles with the United Nations. For his work, he has won a string of accolades, including the President's Service Award – the highest honour for volunteer service in America – but it is so clearly, blindingly, not about the recognition. Dikembe Mutombo's work has cured, prevented and educated, but it is still an upward battle, and one that will never, in his lifetime, be fully won. So, why push so hard? The answer may lie in the modern African proverb: "When you take the elevator up and reach the top, don't forget to send it back down so that someone else can take it up," he once said. "This is my way of sending the elevator back down."

The Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital will have its official opening July 17 and is in need of donations. Anyone interested in contributing should visit www.dmf.org to learn more.