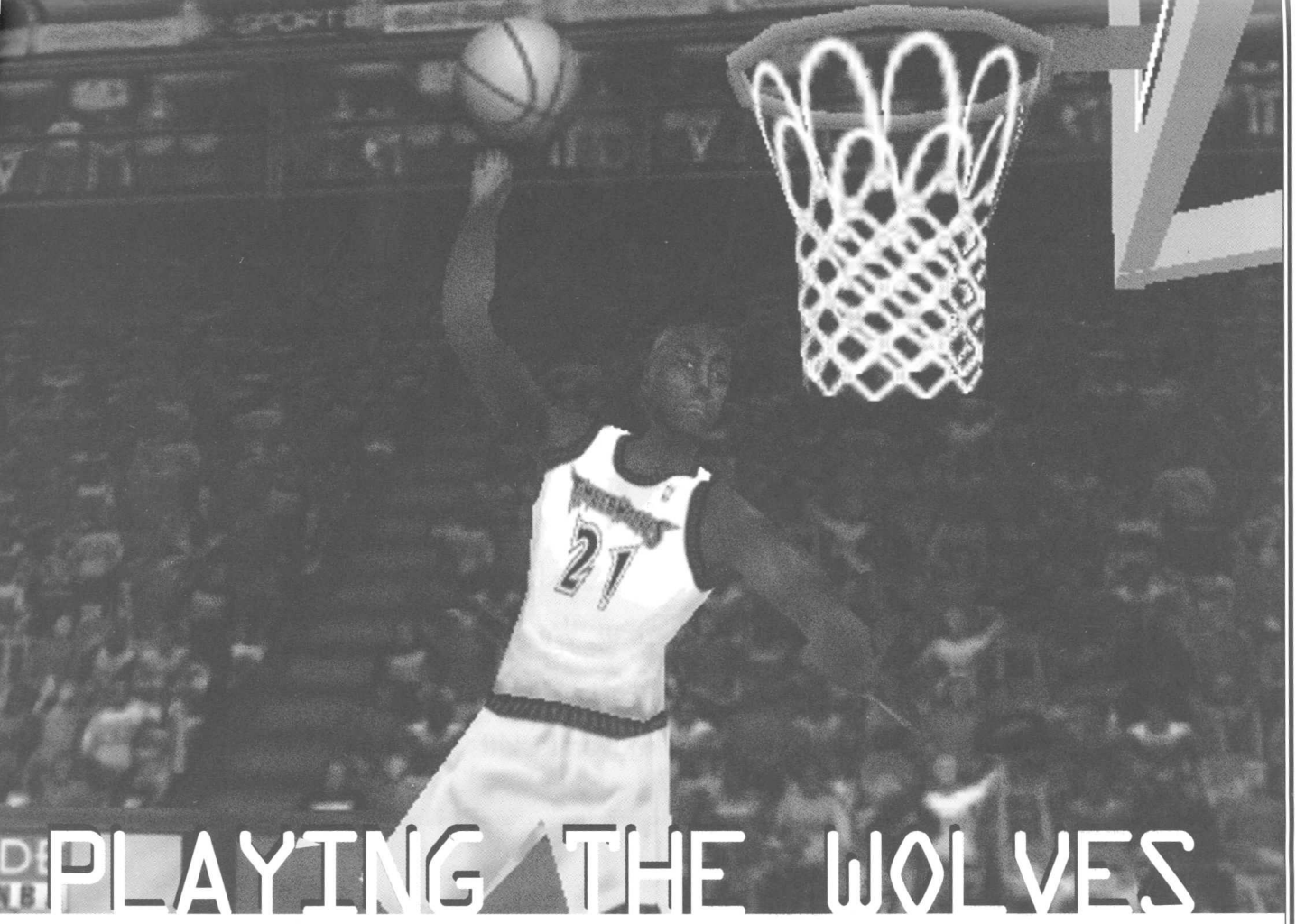

TIMBERWOLVES
LAKERS
6
TONIGHT
DECEMBER 16, 1997
Los Angeles Lakers



PLAYING THE WOLVES

BY DAVE SMITH

Doug West throws an alley-oop to Shaq, who slams it over the Mailman as time expires!! Wolves win!" shouts Kevin Harlan.

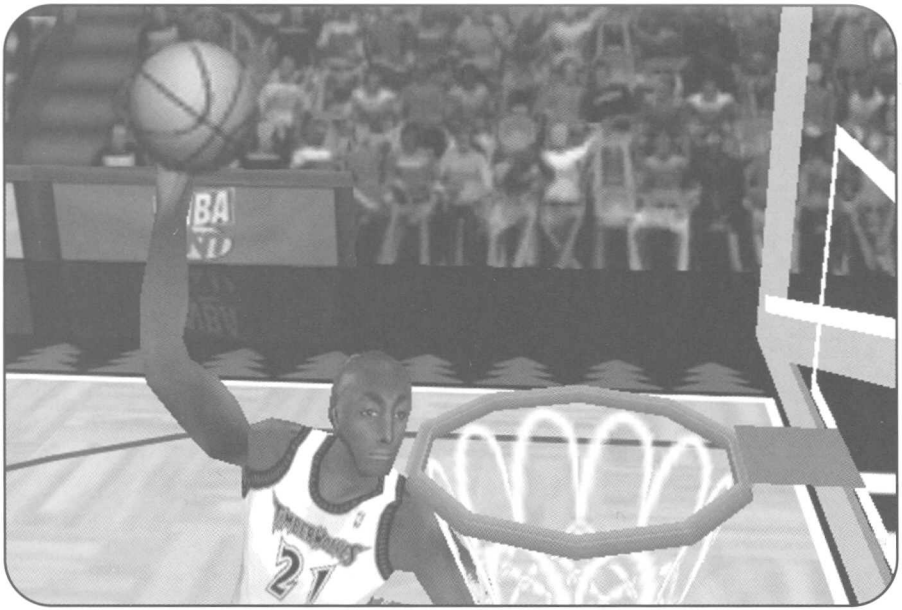
It's the last game of the 1992-93 season and the Timberwolves just beat the Jazz, 99 to 89. Karl Malone scored thirty-one points for Utah, but the Timberwolves' Shaquille O'Neal pulled down twelve rebounds. Wait a minute – Shaq with the Timberwolves? How can that be? In the world of computer simulation, NBA board games or video arcade games, anything is possible. And now more than ever, the Wolves are showing up as players in these off-court, realistic games.

Statistical simulation is one of the exciting ways you can play the Timberwolves – but it doesn't necessarily have to be the Timberwolves you've known through their nine-year history. You can find out what could have happened if a little Ping-Pong ball fell differently than it did on draft day, June 24, 1992, when the Wolves got the third choice instead of the first and Shaquille O'Neal. Using Strat-O-Matic's statistical simulation computer basketball game, the 1992-93 Timberwolves with O'Neal won twenty-nine games. In real life, with Christian Laettner the Timberwolves won nineteen. There are all kinds of possibilities, and here's a quick look at three ways to explore them.

HOW TO PLAY THE GAME

Statistical simulation sports board games consist of dice, player cards and charts of play results. A play or type of shot is selected, dice are rolled and the results are looked up on the player's card or on a chart. The individual player's real-life skills, abilities and statistics are reduced to mathematical ratings or percentages that recreate the strengths and weaknesses of that player in the context of the game. And the game is conducted according to those variables.

The game player coaches a team just like in real basketball, deciding on starting lineups, when to pass



"[We developed] a game that recreates all the statistics, yet preserves the fast-paced action of pro basketball. We're statistically analyzing each player to get at the heart of his performance and gain a greater knowledge of their overall skills."

the ball, who takes a shot and who defends who. Player cards are updated each year using the prior season's statistics, so the game features the best and most popular players and bases their performances on their latest stats.

APBA Game Company and Strat-O-Matic Game Company are the two leading manufacturers of sports board games, and APBA brought out their first basketball game in 1965 (and a revised version in 1992), while Strat-O-Matic's appeared in 1973. The games have entertained NBA fans for years.

"As a kid, growing up before the Timberwolves and before cable television, playing basketball board games was the only way to experience the NBA," says Kevin Hennessy, a local sports game collector and historian. "We didn't see a game in person or many on television, so we

learned a lot about the NBA and its players by playing the board games. The games taught us the finer points of basketball. They advertised the NBA and its players."

GETTING WIRED

Both APBA and Strat-O-Matic market computer basketball games using player stats, as well. The computer basically replaces the dice and generally speeds up play. Played automatically on a computer, a complete basketball game can be played in seconds, and an entire season in a matter of minutes.

Statistical simulation games (either board or electronic) are designed to accurately reproduce a player's performance. It takes a lot of knowledge, number-crunching, and judgment to get it right. Jim Tinneny is the director of APBA and the designer of APBA's revised basketball game. Tinney describes the process in this way:

"In basketball, every action is a statistical category. You have to develop a game that recreates all the statistics, yet preserves the fast-paced action of pro basketball. You do that by statistically analyzing each player to get at the heart of his performance. You gain a greater knowledge about the overall skills of a player.

"For example, one of the most overlooked statistics in basketball is additional possessions. Dennis Rodman's offensive rebounding ability can give the Bulls an extra seven or eight possessions a game. If they convert four rebounds into baskets, there are an additional eight points a game. Likewise, turnovers reduce a team's possessions and opportunities to score points. Cleveland's slower-paced style of play reduces the number of turnovers in contrast to the fast break style of the Lakers."

Strat-O-Matic's James Williams is in charge of scouting and rating the players for the board and computer games. He rates players' abilities for the game by taking an overall view of the player, as well as by types of shots taken, rebounding ability, passing, turnovers and defensive skills. Williams likes Kevin Garnett, Tom Gugliotta and Stephon Marbury as players both on the court and for his simulation games. Williams is from Brooklyn, New York, and has watched fellow Brooklynite Marbury play basketball since he was a high school legend.

"The key position is point guard and Marbury will be among the top three point guards in the league in a few years," predicts Williams.

Not to mention being featured on NBA games for years to come.

MADE FOR THE ARCADE

While statistical simulation games emphasize statistical accuracy, arcade games emphasize realistic-looking animations.

"Arcade games are graphic simulations. They are designed to look like a real-life game on television," explains Andy McNamara, editor of Funcoland's Game Informer magazine. "They have announcers, sound effects, different camera angles, and the characters look and move realistically. The game player takes an active role calling plays, setting defenses and controlling the players on the court. The games have artificial intelligence, or a computer 'brain,' that guides how the characters react to the game player's actions."

NBA Live '98 creates an "NBA on TNT" presentation with TNT announcers Verne Lundquist and Ernie Johnson, Jr. "NBA Live '98 is a simulation of basketball that gives a real feel for the game with crowd noises, arena sounds and music, even the sound of the ball bouncing," says Kathy Frazier, a PR specialist for EA Sports, the game's manufacturer. "It's statistically accurate, using artificial intelligence for each player. There are five play modes: season, series, exhibition, playoffs and a three-point shoot out. 'Cyber modeling' gives each player lifelike facial features."

This spring, at least one Timberwolves player will be all over the simulated court. Acclaim Entertainment used Marbury to "motion capture" his movements to animate the players of their game, NBA Jam Extreme '98. Motion capture uses a computer program to translate the real-life movements of Marbury to the animated characters.

Why Marbury?

"Stephon Marbury is young and has a dynamic style of play that represents what's fun about basketball," says Peter Waynet, producer of prod-

Wolves Feature cont. on page 84

uct development for Acclaim Entertainment. "Stephon is a dynamic ball handler with an uncanny ability to make the ball move as a part of his body."

Motion capture begins in a room where everything is completely black with no reflecting light. Stephon wore an all black body suit covered with sensors that look like little lights. The basketball is all black and covered with sensors too. Four cameras are set up at different angles to record range and motion and create a three-dimensional picture.

"We have a very high opinion of Marbury," Waynet adds. "He spent two long, arduous, nine-hour days being a human highlight film in front of the motion capture cameras. We asked Stephon to do other players' moves and he knows them, he [illegible] and watches tapes of other players. He has true ball handling skills that are really natural looking and his moves were used for all players."

"In a 3-D environment the computer program translates motion to the game to create lifelike movement," explains Waynet. "The computer redisplays the animation exactly as it occurs. The movement data is the actual NBA star's movement. Stephon Marbury's crossover

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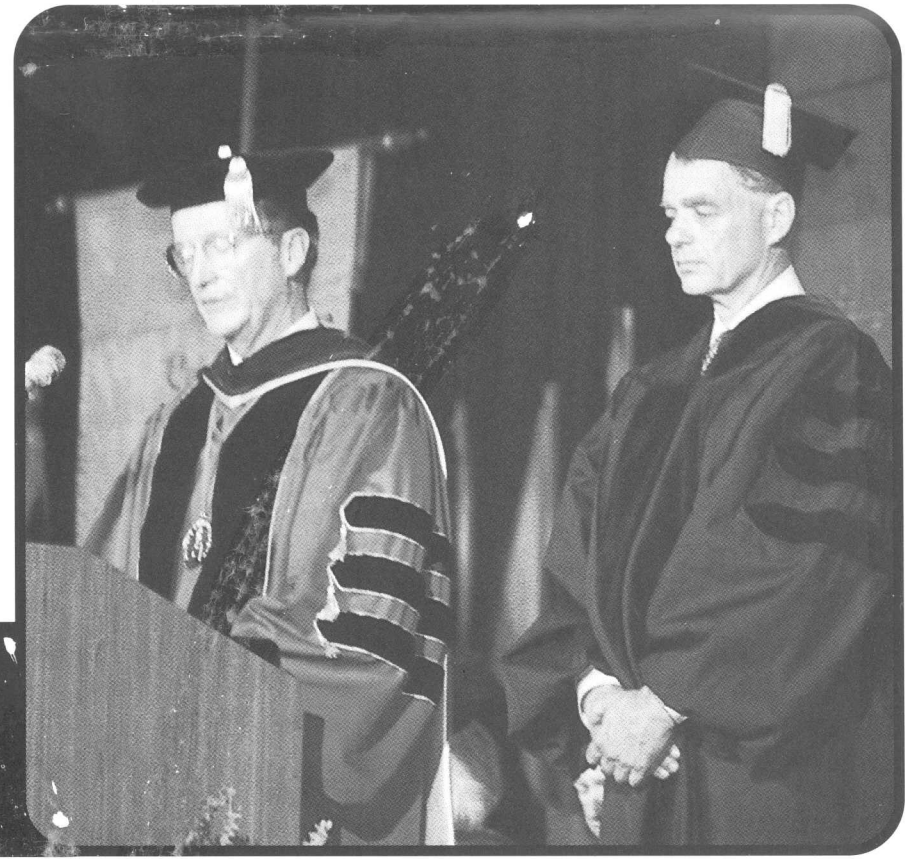
the computer system. It's the closest experience to being in the arena with the real-life game," concludes Waynet.

CREATING YOUR OWN REALITY

Basketball games, whether board, computer or arcade, can provide hours of fun and entertainment. You can be the coach or step into Garnett's or Marbury's "cyber sneakers" and try to lead the Timberwolves to the NBA title. You can even do what KG once claimed to do with his video game: "man his team with four Garnetts and one Gugliotta." You can dream of what might have been if the Timberwolves had drafted Shaq in 1992. With games like these, the possibilities are endless. However, with the statistical accuracy, one thing is going to be certain, whether in real life or in a game – Shaq will still have trouble shooting free throws. ★

abandon Mankato to take up residence in the Twin Cities. "I mean, the Wolves are a lot of fun and the NBA is very glamorous, but I've got 70 employees at Target Center, and in Mankato I've got the headquarters of a 12,000-employee company."

This summer, in recognition of all he has gained from his home town, Taylor, through Taylor Corporation, donated $8 million for a Mankato State university admissions center which included, in recognition of his sporting roots, a 5,000-seat arena. "I love NBA basketball," he says, "but it wouldn't be possible without everything that's come from here." ★



In 1996, Glen Taylor received an honorary doctrate from his alma mater, Mankato State University.