

ARRIVAL TIME

BY MATT BEARDMORE

RYAN GOMES REMEMBERS how he fidgeted in front of the TV as David Stern called name after name ... after name ... after name. Eventually, the guaranteed contracts of the first round passed by without stopping to call on the All-America from Providence.

"I worked out for 18 different teams," Gomes says. "I was starting to wonder if I was going to get drafted."

Sixteen teams passed on the 6'7" forward in the second round as well, before Boston grabbed him at No. 50. The Lakers skipped over Gomes three times, so they had no one to blame but themselves as they watched the 23-year-old score a then-career-high 19 points and snatch 12 rebounds for the Celtics in a 112-111 win at Staples last month.

That victory capped a short but sweet West Coast swing for the C's and Gomes. The 3-1 week was not bad for a team that

opened the trip with a 4-20 road record and hadn't picked up back-to-back away wins all season. And the star turn—Gomes averaged 14 ppg and 10.5 rpg—was not bad for a player who logged a total of 16 minutes in December. "Ryan is an aggressive force," says coach Doc Rivers. "He's been a crucial part of this run."

The run, eight wins in 12 games, started when Gomes was made a starter on Feb. 10. Before then, the Celtics had dropped seven of eight, and two of their young big men—Al Jefferson (sprained ankle) and Kendrick Perkins (dislocated shoulder)—were out of the lineup more than they were in.

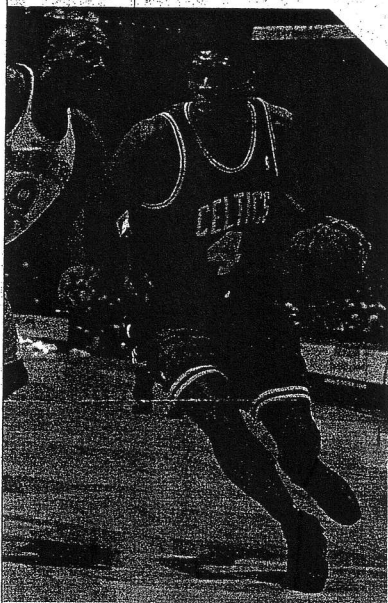
Now, after spending much of the first three months of the season collecting DNP-CDs, Gomes continues to make up for lost time. He's notched 17.5 ppg and 7.3 rpg in March.

"He makes things happen," says Rivers. Those things include working the offensive boards, clogging the middle on D and providing the C's with maybe their most consistent low-post threat since Kevin McHale: Gomes is hitting nearly 60% from the field over the past two months. His play is a big part of the reason Boston is still in the playoff hunt. And isn't it interesting that the resurgence of Paul Pierce didn't start until the rook got some consistent PT?

"I knew it was a long season and that I had to keep working hard," says Gomes. "You never know when your number is going to get called."

Draft night taught him well.

NO NEWCOMER, INCLUDING ROY FAVE CHRIS PAUL, IS SCORING MORE THAN GOMES' 17.5 IN MARCH.



FROM LEFT: DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; LISA BLUMENFELD/GETTY IMAGES