

BANKSHOT

The Longest Bullets' Swift Journey
From Blue Jeans to Blue Chips

By James Reston Jr.

When Mitch Kupchak moved into the pros, he also moved into the fifty per cent tax bracket. And the unassuming college kid who became the Bullets' star rookie suddenly found himself surrounded by agents, hustlers, investment counselors and lawyers. For Kupchak, it has been more than just a tall story: it has been a strange metamorphosis.

October 22, 1976. The Lakers over the Bullets, 103-84. Kareem Abdul Jabbar, playing at the peak of his game, spoils the Bullets' opener. Kupchak plays seven minutes without distinction. Coach Motta says afterwards: "When I saw how nervous Kevin (Grevey) and Mitch looked out there in the first half, I decided I didn't want to have young players on the floor at the same time."

While he showered, I waited on the cold court of the Capital Centre, watching the maintenance man drive the four-wheeled vacuum cleaner across the silent boards. How much, I wondered, did they rely on the body heat of 19,000 fans to warm up the arena? Somehow the vast auditorium is so intimate when it is packed to capacity for this beautiful sport played in such a small area. It had seemed that way the year before when I had watched North Carolina lose to Virginia in the finals of the ACC, disappointed at Mitch's performance.

Elvin Hayes, the Big E—If E scores 30 points, the Bullets win, the cliché runs—was first to emerge from the locker room after the noon practice, clad in leather, walking by me unnoticing with that marvelous, imperious chieftain's air. A few minutes later, Dick Motta bounded by. "Which way are the administrative offices?" he needed to know. Was he putting me on? "No, we've only played here twice before in the pre-season," he explained, and I directed the new coach up the east bank of seats.

Eventually Mitch appeared, dressed in his ever-present rugby shirt, faded jeans and well-worn Keds without socks. That, at least, had not changed from his days on the Carolina campus. At college, he lived on \$600 during the academic year, and drove around in a famous '67 Nova. The vintage car had modestly been devoid of the bumper sticker that adorned so many student cars in the 1975-76 season: **Ford-Kupchak in**

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1976. It was a better ticket in '76 than Ford-Dole. After all, Phil Ford and Mitch Kupchak had delivered *their* gold medal at the '76 Olympics.

He has a classic Eastern European face: pallid white skin, flecked with the vestiges of adolescence, marked by high cheek bones, flat, lidless eyes, markedly red lips in contrast, and a moustache that tries, but has not yet succeeded. He is second-generation immigrant, Polish or Ukrainian, depending on your historical view. "It depended on who was winning wars, as to which my mother's family was called, Polish or Russian," Mitch said. But when his parents didn't want him to understand what they were saying when he was growing up fast in Long Island, they would speak in Polish.

Before we piled in my borrowed Datsun, he needed to get a few things out of his spanking-new gray and red Monte Carlo. "My life-style is already changing," he said. "I spend more than \$100 a week in food. It's ridiculous. You go into a big city and don't know anyone. The only thing to do is go down to the hotel restaurant and have a big steak. It's all different now. It's all business."

We took off for his bank in the small car. Between his knees—which nearly touched the windshield—he held his wallet with his first NBA check in it. ("The government is taking half of it," he complained.) Dean Smith, his coach at Carolina and at the Olympics, had characteristically listed him small in the Carolina program, so that he would look that much taller when opponents saw him in the flesh. There was no need for this slight deviousness in the professional ranks—he was the longest Bullet now at six feet ten-and-a-half inches, and he looked it in that Datsun.

While Mitch navigated the drive to Crofton from the map that Kevin Grevey had drawn for him, he talked about his year. He had had back surgery in 1975, and with no certainty that the operation would be a success, he had thought a great deal about the possibility that basketball might not be in his future after all. He had toyed with the notion of law school and took the law boards. The results had been slightly under what was required for most law schools. He worked hard at his studies, obtained a solid B average, and he bristled noticeably when, at dinner this fall, I mistakenly mentioned the "slide courses that all the athletes take."

But the back grew stronger as the '75-'76 season approached, and when the season was over, he was the ACC Player of the Year, a first-string All American, the center of the undefeated Olympic team and the first-round draft pick of the Washington Bullets.

In the spring of 1976, as Carolina moved towards the



ACC championship, Mitch thought that his pro contract would be in the million dollar range. His competition for big center honors in the nation, Leon Douglas at Alabama and Robert Parish at Centenary, has passed up the Olympic tryouts at Raleigh, North Carolina, saving themselves for the pros, afraid that a poor Olympic performance might hurt their contract negotiations, taking their criticism for being anti-patriotic. Mitch had outsmarted them. He played superbly in the Olympics and improved his negotiating position.

But then the ABA merged with the NBA, and that changed the whole negotiating scheme.

"When there were the two leagues," Mitch's lawyer, Travis Porter, in Durham, North Carolina, told me later, "it was a simple auction where you would have the ABA on one phone, and the NBA on the other. But when they merged, it became a monopoly, and that changed everything." The bidding war was supposed to be over.

But the merger did not produce a complete monopoly. There was still the Italian League—the only other league in the world where a player could draw big money. Not all players, however, were offered salaries in Italy on par with the NBA. To begin with, each Italian team was allowed only one American player. Italians liked the big American players, so Mitch said. They preferred them white rather than black, because the white players adjusted better to Italian culture. Mitch knew this from a former Carolina player, Ed Stahl, a six-foot-ten-inch center who had played at Venice for a year. So when Mitch was afforded the choice between Italy and the Bullets, he had gone to Stahl's house in Raleigh, hoping that Stahl would tell him that life in Italy was unpleasant and difficult making his choice of the NBA easy. Instead, Stahl said he loved his Italian year.

Mitch's dilemma was this: a fine NBA contract, indeed one of the two best NBA offers in 1976, with security and benefits over an eight-year period, versus an Italian contract for one year with two-and-a-half times as much money up front for that year than the NBA offer. If Mitch took his Italian option, he would have a great deal more money immediately, "for my investors," and could return to the States after that year "almost a free agent."

"The Bullets could draft me again," he said, "but if they didn't meet my terms, I could go back and play in Italy. They would know I wasn't bluffing."

But there were risks in the Italian option. Should the big man get hurt or not play well, there was no insurance for the future. He would be finished. And while much was made of the chunk of tax-free money up front in the Italian offer, the money would be taxed once it

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Clockwise from top left:

Kupchak and Elvin Hayes (11) leap for an offensive rebound against the Phoenix Suns.

Kupchak waits on the Bullets bench. The towel wards off the chill rising from the ice on which the playing floor is laid.

As the Bullets score just at the half-time buzzer, Kupchak jumps up from the bench.

Kupchak holds off Dennis Awtrey of the Suns as teammate Phil Chenier moves up.

Awtrey guards Kupchak as the Bullets get the ball.

Photographs by Bill Sneed

came into the United States—and the Tax Reform Act of 1976 had virtually wiped out the advantages of high earnings abroad. Still worse, some players in Italy had had difficulty in getting paid. Mitch, unlike Richard Nixon, did worry about the lira. So before he considered Italy, Mitch made sure that his negotiator and agent, Larry Fleisher, set up a deal with the Italians, so that his salary would be paid directly into a Swiss bank and the money in turn could be transferred to the Citibank of New York.

At 2:30 p.m. we arrived at our destination, the shopping center in Crofton, where, Mitch warned, it would take fifteen or twenty minutes to work out some things with his new banker. But the bank door was locked, closed until 4:30. "I'm gonna kill Grevey," Mitch quipped. "He said it would be open." Actually, he was grateful to Kevin Grevey, the two-year man out of Kentucky. Grevey had agreed to rent Mitch a room in a new house that the Kentucky star had just bought in Crofton. Mitch's rent was \$135 a month. "You can't do better than that," he said. He made his second big purchase after his new automobile: a king-size Hide a Bed. Mitch had no interest in decorating his room with old mementos. All his trophies, including his Olympic gold medal, have been left behind with his parents in Brentwood, Long Island. "They mean more to my parents now than to me," he said. "They have to do with what I've been in the past, not what I'm going to be in the future."

How much were rents in Washington, he wanted to know. Two years ago I had rented an apartment on Capitol Hill for \$360 a month. He whistled. "Threeee hundred and sixty dollars," he chimed, shaking his head. He was succeeding in making me feel like a millionaire.

We retired to a pizza joint in the shopping center. Mitch insisted on paying for his greasy cheese and ham submarine: it was a principle with him, bred from years of others trying to foist favors on him. One feels in Mitch's constant searching stare that he is always asking himself, "Is this guy a phony or for real? What does he want out

At the table, he talked about guarding Kareem Abdul-Jabbar that night. "It's no big thing," he said, taking a big bite from the sandwich. "He's only the best who ever played the game. No big deal." I looked at the sandwich. What should one eat before an evening of guarding Kareem Abdul-Jabbar? The question had never occurred to me before.

November 4, 1973. The Bullets over the Milwaukee Bucks, 117-105. The victory is considered a comeback for the Bullets after four straight losses. Talk of a trade for a ball-handling guard is rife, and the focus of the press criticism is on Dave Bing. But Bing plays well against the Bucks, and Larry Wright, the other first-round draft pick with Mitch, emerges as a new force: "the spark plug," he is called later. Playing against two other rookies from his Olympic experience, Quinn Buckner, the Indiana All American, and Scott Lloyd, the last man to be cut from the Olympic squad, Mitch has a solid thirteen minutes.

Mitch sat on the hardwood bench in the locker room amid the scant appurtenances of his sport, his legs akimbo, going through his stylized two-minute interview with a reporter in a green leisure suit and neatly styled hair. The questions were stock, and the answers patterned. He had done it a hundred times by now, and he was customarily self-effacing.

"I'm not going to run any faster, jump any higher, or get any quicker in the future," he said. "I need to develop my moves. Most of these veterans have made every move a dozen times before, and I haven't reached that stage yet." Later, Mitch would dismiss the importance of thought in basketball. "Anything I do out on the floor is purely spontaneous. I did all my thinking in junior high school, high school, and college. I'm through with thinking now. If I try to think when I'm playing, it's just going to mess me up."

The questions came as usual:

Was the play in the NBA rougher than the Olympics? (Compare and contrast.)

Isn't it a step down to come to the NBA after achieving the highest possi-

ble athletic honor at the Olympics? (The baiting question.)

You seem so emotional on the bench, rooting for the team. . .

The press had taken note of Mitch's quaint enthusiasm from the sidelines. It was such a change from most professionals warming the bench who seem to roll their eyes laconically across the ceiling as much as across the court.

Mitch handled it all with diplomatic buoyancy and humility. He denied that he was a "supertalented" athlete. He stressed his aggressiveness and rebounding, and his role as a playmaker rather than a scorer. He heaped praise on the other players on the team. He particularly thanked Wes Unseld (who, of course, Mitch was trying to beat out) for all Unseld had taught him.

I admired the performance from a distance. When I approached him, he started into a rap about the good game, how "winning could become a habit," but he sensed quickly that such talk was not my interest, and the subject changed to the details of my talk that week with his old coach Dean Smith and his lawyer Travis Porter. Later, Mitch would explain that, in the pros, one had to be careful—extra careful—in talking with the press. There were several taboos. You could not discuss contract money or the personal life-styles of other players, or about the coaches or the management. Careers could be broken by such talk.

"People say to me on the street, 'Hey, Mitch, don't you know so-and-so is making five times as much as you?' and I reply 'So what, it's not coming out of my pocket.' You get as much as you can at the beginning, and then concentrate on the game."

In college, he remembered, the press treated him as a college kid. "You didn't play a very good game, but you tried hard," the reporters would say. Here, if you play a bad game, the press lets you have it hard, as if you humiliated yourself and the club before 19,000 fans. So you have to hide a lot. I'm hiding a lot from you. I'm vulnerable now. The vulnerabilities all revolve around my ability to play the game, and so I'm cautious."

Mitch's caution, off the

court, was encouraged by his North Carolina attorney, Travis Porter. Seated in his glass-surrounded office, looking down on the aromatic Lucky Strike plant in Durham, Porter had talked in measured tones about "the veritable jungle" that young athletes like Mitch faced when they moved into the pros. He spoke of the agents "literally jumping out from behind potted plants," offering athletes every type of service, making all sorts of representations: legal, negotiating, but mainly financial, usually at a high percentage of the athlete's offer from the pros, and usually upfront at the outset.

"Many athletes pay far more for every type of service than they should," Porter had said. "Why shouldn't an athlete be able to buy any service at the same rate as could any businessman, who makes over \$100,000 a year?" Porter felt that an athlete should pay his lawyer, his investment counselor, and his negotiator at an hourly rate, rather than a percentage, but he demurred from telling any horror stories of professional basketball. He would only say of other former North Carolina stars in the NBA like Robert MacAdoo of the Knicks and Charlie Scott of the Celtics, "Ask them how many agents they've had in their careers."

In the locker room, after the Bullets had defeated the Celtics two weeks later, I did ask Charlie Scott that.

Charlie Scott was the first North Carolina player to come to professional basketball with a gigantic contract, and both he and his coach, Dean Smith, were "babes in the woods" about the dangers and the pitfalls. After some mistakes, he had settled on investments in shopping centers and apartment complexes as a method "to hold onto what I'm making." For Scott, after some experimentation, having his money secure with a high yield soon became most important.

Scott felt that over half of all pro basketball players were taken in one way or another in their basketball careers. The ten-per-cent "rip-off" was the classic way in which some agents were swindling, especially when Scott came into the league seven years ago. The other way was to demand a fat fee at the beginning—"front-end loaded," as it was called—ig-

noring the inflation that would whittle the player's dollar as the years passed.

"The agent is not dealing with his negotiating power," Scott complained, "He's dealing with the athlete's power. But the athlete is not present during the money negotiations, and he doesn't know if the agent spent an hour or a week settling his contract." Scott agreed with Travis Porter that the athlete should be billed on an hourly basis.

"You're a businessman when you come into the league. No student right out of college can comprehend it all. Suddenly you've got more money than you ever had, more than you need. You no longer relate to people who wear jeans and a tee-shirt. Everybody's driving fine cars and living in houses that cost more than \$60,000. It's a Pandora's box, and it takes two or three years to understand what's happening to you.

"The playing time and the high-earning years are so short in pro basketball, and one day, not too far from now, Mitch won't have an agent any more, and he's got to understand it himself."

November 6, 1976. The Bullets win their second victory over the world champion Celtics in two nights. Mitch plays well for more than twenty minutes of the game. The Celtics' mainstay, Dave Cowens, is contained, and a week later he takes an indefinite, unpaid leave, saying he felt guilty at taking his \$200,000 salary from the Celtics. "I had no motivation or enthusiasm," he explained. A pattern begins to develop for Kupchak's contribution to the Bullets. He is inserted for Wes Unseld several minutes into the second quarter, plays until the half, and takes on spot duty in the final periods of play.

Bob Ferry, the general manager of the Bullets, played for ten years as a big man in the NBA, and he knows the importance of longevity. His office in the Capital Centre is a modest cubicle cluttered with papers. A trophy of some sort is stuck haphazardly in a corner, and sayings of Vince Lombardi are framed over a couch as the only decoration.

"Sports teaches everyone who is a part to be proud and unbending in defeat, yet humble in victory—to master themselves before they

master others," one saying reads.

He shoved some papers aside, yanked a blank Bullets Scouting Report from a loose-leaf notebook, and began to simulate what Mitch's report card looked like that year. The original has long since disappeared—Ferry is not interested in history. When he had finished, the notes at the bottom read:

"Mitch will be *at worst* a solid ten-year, hustling, winning veteran. Gives 100 per cent. Great kid from great college. Sought-after High School player. Had played on the U.S. team last four years." Ferry gave the rookie a "potential rating" of five on the scale of five, and that was under the "super" column. Aggressiveness and running ability were Mitch's strong suit; his physique, said the report, was not as strong as Dave Cowen's. His liabilities were that he must learn to shoot with his back to the basket, look for shots more, and improve his defensive quickness to the ball.

For Ferry, the talent in scouting the NBA players rests not in spotting raw, native ability—"I can watch good basketball being played all day long," he said—but in the psychological intangibles and a few tangibles as well—like who the player's coach is, how long has he been a quality player, how good he was in high school. His stock question is: "How do you pick one player over another of equal ability?" His answer, less than scientific perhaps, is: "I want to have a good feeling in my stomach. It's like listening to a pretty song."

It is the paradox of Mitch Kupchak that intrigues Bob Ferry. "On the court, he is an intense competitor, almost reckless. He gives all of his body, and I know the veterans hate to practice with him. He treats every practice as if it were a playoff game. But in his life-style, he is very cautious, calculated and conservative. He weighs his decisions carefully, and makes the right decisions."

Of course, Ferry would think that. Mitch chose the Bullets instead of a more lucrative contract in Italy.

Ferry ascribes much of the credit for Mitch's maturity to Dean Smith, the North Carolina coach, whom Ferry called "one of the greatest molders of basketball players as people ever."

"Dean Smith recruits a

certain type of player, then molds him into a team-type person, and a sincere and dedicated individual. After four years with Smith, the player has a serious approach to basketball and to life."

To see Smith in his home setting, in his spacious walnut-paneled office in the gymnasium on the campus at North Carolina, is to understand Mitch Kupchak's behavior as he moved into the NBA. Smith has more wins in his career than any other active coach in America, now topping 330 wins. Yet over the years he has cultivated a one-dimensional image: that of the nice, self-effacing gentleman, who usually finished first. Smith shades his private life and his private self, nearly to the point of obsession, from his players and the sports writers. Over the years, the handouts have featured him as a family man, the father of three. When, last summer, during the Olympic tryouts in Raleigh, North Carolina, the trials that Mitch Kupchak dominated, a box in the paper announced that Smith had remarried, few knew that he had ever been divorced. While he had been dating his second wife for over two years, no one could remember having seen them together in public.

Smith, 46, makes a great deal of his "student-athletes." And Mitch is the quintessence of that concept. During the autumn, I asked Mitch about women, and he replied "I never got involved with anyone in college because I didn't think it would be fair. My first priority was basketball, and my second was to graduate." Recently, after his Olympic triumph, Smith was asked what his greatest accomplishment was, and replied that over half his players go on to some form of graduate work, and that only two had failed to graduate. Of that, he was proudest.

It is not easy to get Smith to sit down for anything other than the most pro forma comment about the splendor of his men. Personal questions make him nervous and querulous. He constantly glances at his watch, hoping his questioner will get to the point. Still, last summer during the tryouts, I pursued him over lunch with the story (talked about with some jest in the academic corridors) that

ter themselves before they

Smith read theology as his favorite pastime, and that Kierkegaard was his favorite theologian.

"Kierkegaard speaks of the leap of faith," he said in his distinctive flat accent of the Plains. "He would take people to the point of need, and then say they can find God. He brings it to the point of the absurd, like Sartre does, and then says, here's an answer. You can choose it if you wish. Not that I read Kierkegaard and Tillich to help me be a better coach, no. It's a process of self-searching. I used to play tennis with a religion professor; he'd want to talk basketball, and I'd want to talk theology." That conversation itself had a certain existential quality to it: All around our lunch table, the assistant coaches were locked in debate over the twelve players, out of the fifty best in the country, who would make the trip to Montreal.

Part of the devotion of Smith's players stems from his availability for advice and help as long as they should want it. This became manifest for Mitch Kupchak as he moved from an amateur to highly paid professional. Coach Smith's lawyer, Travis Porter, screened the well known agents in the sports management business, and came up with the following formula.

Instead of retaining a firm which combines contract negotiation with investment and tax counseling, like the Washington-based firm of former tennis star Donald Dell, Mitch retained Larry Fleisher, the NBA Players Association representative and sports agent, to handle his contract negotiation between Italy and the Bullets. For his financial planning, Mitch retained an Atlanta-based investment counselor and lawyer, David Heinsma of the Lundquist Heinsma Corporation. Heinsma had never handled a highly paid sports figure before, but had ample experience with the personal investments of lawyers and corporation executives.

Before Heinsma was hired, however, he had to make an oral presentation to Mitch and his mother, to Dean Smith, to a friend of Mitch's and another former Carolina player and ABA pro, Dennis Wysick, to the lawyer, Travis Porter and to Otto Stolz, a Duke, Law professor who

specializes in securities regulation. It was a lot of screening for a professional investment counselor to endure, and it's doubtful that most of those who hide behind potted plants could have withstood the interrogation.

November 17, 1976. The Bullets top the New York Knicks, 111-97, in a "walk." Kupchak scores ten in nineteen minutes of play, and grabs seven rebounds: not quite as impressive as his statistics in the loss to the Knicks on November 9, when he had eleven rebounds and ten points. The press begins to refer to him as "the steadily improving rookie."

In the Gulf-Western Building on Columbus Circle in New York, the first thing you see when you walk into the office of Larry Fleisher, the agent and representative for the National Basketball Players Association, is part of a basketball floor—a section of the key to be exact, stuck against the wall as decoration. Was it part of the Phoenix Suns floor, I asked, replaced last year, bringing \$18,000 on the souvenir market? No, came the answer: it was a special-order item.

Fleisher's position as both an agent and the representative of the player's union is not unique in sport—he has counterparts in hockey and Canadian football—but the advantages are many. The biggest advantage is that when he is negotiating for a player like Mitch Kupchak, he has a broad view of the market, knows what others are being offered, and knows when a club's offer is out of line. Fleisher got his position by working sixteen years in the business, ten of them before there was an effective basketball players' union, when the salaries were small, as were his fees. But things began to change in 1967 with the founding of the ABA, and the threat of the first players' strike resulted in a players' pension plan. Until 1969-70, he had the field to himself, but the big salaries arrived then, and along with that phenomenon, the platoons of agents flooded the business. When David Thompson, the superstar from North Carolina State, played in a post-season classic in Hawaii, two years ago, before going to the Denver Nuggets, he was hounded by some forty agents. Very few

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attorneys.

Fleisher knows the horror stories of the last seven years well: the kickbacks to college coaches, the under-the-table payments to players still in college, the ten per cent-of-salary, fifteen per cent-of-financial-assets ripoffs, the ex-pro players "shilling" for agents, but he believes that the shysters in the business are disappearing, weeded out by their bad reputations. His fee never exceeds two per cent of a player's salary.

The Kupchak contract negotiation was "strange" for Larry Fleisher for several reasons. Mitch came from a school that had turned out many pros, and he had planned on playing pro basketball for a number of years. The Denver Nuggets, known as a North Carolina team, with its Carolina coach, Larry Brown, and Carolina superstars, David Thompson and Bobby Jones, had talked to Mitch Kupchak during his senior year in college, and had expressed great interest in him early. (Mitch had flown to Denver to watch the Nuggets play at his own expense before the Olympics. These direct overtures ceased when the ABA merged with the NBA.) Finally, Mitch was a "tough client" because he had his heart set on a million-dollar contract. When he was drafted low in the spring, as the fourth center in the country taken, his negotiating power suffered. In the Olympics, Mitch felt he had something to prove, and evidently, so did the Bullets.

After the Bullets drafted Kupchak in May, their initial offer was tepid, nowhere near the million-dollar mark. But when Larry Fleisher flew to Monte Carlo for the annual NBA players' convention, representatives from an Italian team, Simmenthal, flew over from Milan to talk about Kupchak. (Simmenthal was the Italian team that Bill Bradley of the Knicks played for, when he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford.) The Italian interest became even stronger when Mitch had a particularly good game in the Olympics against Italy. The Polish name Kupchak became a household word in Italy.

In mid-August, Simmenthal dropped out of the bargaining, and another team, Fernet of Bologna, entered with a major push to sign

who use the clubs to promote their products. Fernet is a tonic. Between August 15 and September 23, Fernet negotiated long and hard. Twice the son of the company owner flew to New York to talk with Larry Fleisher. On one visit he literally lived in Fleisher's office for eight days.

With Dean Smith acting as a buffer and playing a more active role than any coach ever had in Fleisher's experience, the negotiations came to a climax on the weekend of September 20. Fleisher felt that Kupchak was looking for a reason not to go to Italy, that Mitch had been geared as an "ego thing" to play in the NBA, and would have been unhappy abroad. But the big lira remained a big incentive, and when Mitch was reached by the Washington Star after a Carolina football game, he said, "The best thing I can do for myself is go to Italy."

This was confirmed by Dean Smith, and led to newspaper headlines that Mitch was going abroad. The gamesmanship was at its height, but Larry Fleisher worried that the hand was being overplayed. He called Dean Smith and told him that it was not necessary to put out the Italian story to get the Bullets to come around. By this time, Fleisher knew his client well, knew that to Mitch Kupchak security was the top priority.

"The fact that he was a tough kid helped him," Fleisher said. "If he had panicked early, it would have made it more difficult for me."

When the Bullets met most of Mitch's demands, particularly a guaranteed, long-term contract, he signed on September 23. His contract was the largest the Bullets had ever paid for a first-round draft pick, even though it was not the million-dollar contract that Mitch coveted.

"Mitch could have done still better with the Bullets," Fleisher said, "if he had taken a shorter term contract, one or two years, and then become a free agent. But Mitch wanted security. He's fortunate to end up with the Bullets. Wes Unseld will be a great influence on him, like a second coach."

December 2. Bullets defeat the Hawks, 102-90 in

Atlanta, breaking a five-game losing streak on the road. In the Bullets' agony, Mitch Kupchak arrives as an important factor on the team. In Seattle, where Mitch scores nineteen points, Coach Bill Russell, one of the great centers of all time, says 'Mitch Kupchak really showed me something. He got them back in the game with his hustle. He really works hard under the boards.' In Los Angeles, Kupchak scores twenty-six, and is featured in the papers as the only bright spot on the dismal road trip. His shooting percentage by this time, over fifty per cent, leads the Bullets.

On the afternoon of December 2, Mitch took a cab from his hotel to the Lennox Square area of Atlanta, and emerged at a spectacular, new, mirror-windowed skyscraper called Tower Place. On the twenty-fifth floor, he sat down with his investment counselor, David Heinsma, for a three-hour session on his investment strategy for the first half of 1977.

"A year and a half ago," Mitch would say later, "I was completely ignorant of all this stuff, but I've learned so much in the last year."

But was it enough? I asked Mitch how he was preparing himself to handle all his money, and he spoke of reading *Time* and *Business Week*, and planning to take an investment and tax course at the University of North Carolina next summer. His background in finance consisted of the two basic economics courses at UNC. Was he prepared for the technical language that Heinsma spoke: negotiable money market instruments, no-load mutual funds, municipal bonds vs. common stocks, leverage and diversification?

David Heinsma exudes the energy of the New South, Atlanta in particular, of which Jimmy Carter is such a product. In fact, Heinsma was a county campaign manager for Carter in his first unsuccessful run for the Georgia governorship in 1966 and advised Carter on energy policy in the early stage of the Presidential campaign. Lawyer and investment specialist with expertise in the oil and gas field, Heinsma was enthusiastic about his new client. Mitch was the first professional athlete to whom his company had made a complete commitment, and he

found Mitch "bright, aware, with native ingenuity in the business world . . . With Mitch's basic frugality," Heinsma said, "there is no danger of him becoming a wastrel."

Heinsma and his partner, Philip Lundquist, reviewed Mitch's tax posture and examined the market outlook for the coming months, before they put forward their strategy for 1977. "The primary objective for your investment situation for the first half of 1977 should be to build liquidity. Secondly, you should commence diversification," their presentation read. Due to the dynamics of the bond market, they didn't recommend that Mitch be an aggressive buyer of bonds in early 1977, but rather build his cash cushion and diversity with no-load mutual funds. For his first major investment, they recommended he buy into an oil-and-gas scheme combining shallow drilling for gas in twelve wells in Texas and deep drilling in eight wells in Illinois. It would be a deal with a high "risk-reward ratio," they told him, and the underlying economics of en-

ergy investment were good now. Mitch would have to take their word for it.

Kupchak was on his way towards a "balanced portfolio."

The counselors then moved on to a discussion of tax shelters. They counseled Mitch on the implications of the 1976 Tax Reform Act, and suggested leverage and deferral schemes to reduce his tax bite. The point of it all, as Mitch understood it, was "to reduce the tax bite as much as possible and then to try to keep as much of my money as I can." But his explanation was tentative, and he admitted that he really didn't understand it all. He was grateful when I passed along to him a pamphlet on tax shelters from the Joint Taxation Committee.

Finally, there was the matter of endorsements. The Wilson Sporting Goods Company had offered a deal for a signed Mitch Kupchak basketball, with a royalty for each ball sold. Mitch was one of twenty pro players to be offered the package, and Mitch would joke that he wishes all twenty signatures could appear on the same

basketball, so his name, next to that of All-Pro George McGinnis of the '76ers, might improve sales. Several basketball shoe companies had also offered endorsements. Some offered money; others only a percentage; and one offered money and a vacation to Africa this summer. Of course, wearing the shoe in games was the quid pro quo, and the shoe from the African vacation company was uncomfortable. "But they offered to build me a comfortable shoe," Mitch said, "and I told 'em I'd try it."

Looking back on the Atlanta meeting days later, Mitch realized the dangers. "If Heinsma wants to take me up the river, he can do it. He can hide so much. But at my age, I've got to trust him. I'm still feeling him out, and I'm not putting all my money to him at once."

It reminded me of what Dean Smith had said, "Investments of a pro player like Mitch should not be set up as if he were a 12-year-old kid: Hand him an allowance and turn over the rest to the investors." Mitch intended no such setup. In fact, he had

set the goal for himself that by age 30, he would be able to handle most of his financial affairs on his own. Of course, that was postulated on the notion that he would be playing in the NBA until age 35.

By the end of 1976, one could sense from the applause when he entered the game at Capital Centre that Mitch was developing his following in Washington. The crowd loved the wild abandon of his play and the apparent simplicity of his pleasant, enthusiastic demeanor. There was little overt sense of the tensions that boiled within Mitch. Once, in a post-game show at the Capital Centre, with the lights turned out, Mitch was asked about his triumph and the team's disaster on the road.

"I guess you don't want to show yourself on the street much when you're losing like that," the announcer asked.

"I like to sleep a lot and eat a lot anyway," Mitch replied. "That's important to me. So it really didn't change my routine."

That was the public Mitch. In fact, I knew he

hated hanging around a hotel room in a strange city. We had talked about sightseeing in San Francisco, and he liked my suggestion that he drive up to a good Czechoslovakian restaurant I knew near Point Reyes when the Bullets played Golden State. Beyond that, I knew that he found reading novels a good relaxation from all the things on his mind. "I'm young and just starting in this league. I know I can play here, and I want to play more. So I've got a lot of things on my mind, and reading washes all those thoughts away. I just bought *Shogun*. It's 1300 pages long, and it might just last me the whole season."

But you don't say all that on a post-game show at the Capital Centre.

During the fall, the private Mitch came to dinner one night in the Georgetown salon that I had the use of for six months. There, the paradox of Kupchak came clear. It went back to February 16, 1974. Mitch will never forget the date. He keeps five years of old basketball schedules in his wallet, and Carolina was playing

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Florida State in Greensboro, North Carolina. Suddenly, he had a back spasm and it frightened him. On the bus ride home, he couldn't move, couldn't bend over. In two or three days it was over, but a month later, his hamstring started giving him problems and periodic back spasms occurred. At the hospital, they ran a milogram test, shooting dye into the spinal column, and there it was: a bump in a disc was pressing on a nerve. He tried medication, and when that had no effect, he tried acupuncture. Eighteen needles, some attached to batteries, were inserted, starting in the lumbar portion of the back going all the way down his leg. The needles were pressed in three inches deep and twirled until they hit a nerve and got a response. Mitch tried the treatment four times a week for two weeks, but it was so painful that he had to give it up. It wasn't helping anyway. So he had a choice: Could he risk back surgery to remove a portion of a disc, and take a chance that removing part of the disc would weaken the whole structure of the back?

Mitch took the chance, and it worked out . . . so far, but the effect was lasting on his outlook. "I have a health problem," he said, "and when I thought about the NBA, I didn't know if the back could hold up under a 100-game schedule. Now I know it can."

After dinner, we took a walk around Georgetown to lighten the mood. Mitch had once tried to find the area with a few Carolina friends, but they had gotten lost. On Wisconsin Avenue, he looked at a new pair of jeans at Britches, but of course the store didn't have his size. "When you're my size, and you find something that fits, buy it," he said. He seemed to enjoy the stroll past Henry Kissinger's house the most, though. We went by twice, glancing gingerly at the Secret Service man standing in the doorway. The cop wore a London Fog.

"I just can't believe that Secret Servicemen really do wear trench coats," Mitch laughed.

By mid-February, the coach and the Bullets organization were talking about the "Mitch Kupchak phenomenon." His enthusiasm, his eagerness to help the team however he could, far from

paling after a few swings around the league with hard-bitten veterans, had infected the other Bullets, and his contribution to their February lead in the Central Division was unmistakable. In the January 30 game against the Kansas City Kings, the statisticians counted the times that Kupchak dove on the hard floor for a loose ball: fourteen.

Before the trading deadline of February 1, the Bullets tried hard to get Kevin Porter back from the Detroit Pistons, but the Pistons wanted Kupchak, and there was no deal. The Denver Nuggets, with the best record in the NBA, also made another strong pitch for Mitch before February 1, and the Bullets told them to ask for someone else. Said Coach Motta, "There isn't a coach in the league who wouldn't like to have him right now, but they can't have him. He's not tradeable." ■