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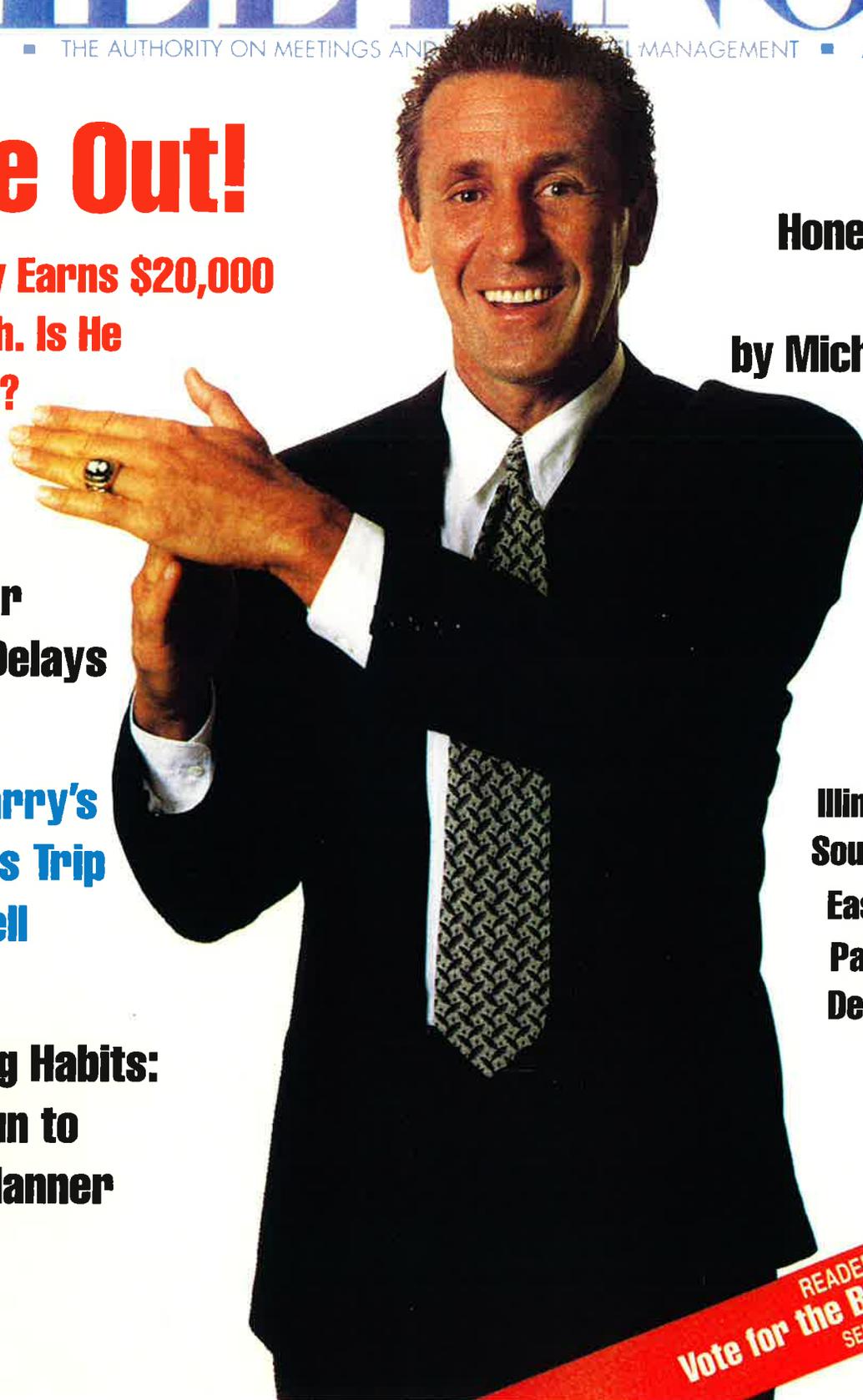
Time Out!

**Pat Riley Earns \$20,000
A Speech. Is He
Worth It?**

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The Life of Riley

*Pat Riley earns \$20,000 a speech.
Is he worth it?*

BY CHARLES BUTLER

Pat Riley walks into the Atrium bar of the Le Meridien hotel in Newport Beach, California, and heads straight for a bar stool. Eyes around the bar widen. He feels them. In minutes, the eyes will bring their heads and arms and mouths to him. Riley, all too familiar with the scene, knows they are coming.

He waits for the bartender. "I need a nice, tall rum-and-Coke," Riley tells me. His face is flushed

red almost matching the maroon in his Armani tie. Tiny drops of sweat rest on his forehead. The former Los Angeles Lakers basketball coach looks as though he had just finished a double-overtime game against the Detroit Pistons. And lost. Actually, he has just completed an evening entertaining 600 or so members of a Southern California home builders association, an evening that included a 55-minute speech on sacrifice and dedication. He's been working. Hard.

When our drinks arrive, we begin to discuss the evening's events. Only now, the bodies are coming one by one. "Mr. Riley," interrupts a young woman hovering over his right shoulder, "I really enjoyed your speech. Thank you very much." Riley smiles. "Well, thank you," he says. "That's nice to hear." The woman leaves, only to be replaced by another person. "Pat, your speech was wonderful. I thought you were going to talk about something technical." Again, Riley flashes the smile.





“Oh, I appreciate that—I think.”

Pat Riley is used to being interrupted. And used to hearing compliments, whether they pertain to his clothes, his coaching, or his looks. Lately, they've pertained to his speaking ability. In the past six years Riley has become one of the most sought-after celebrity sports speakers in the nation, giving an average of 50 speeches a year to various corporations and associations. His engagement fee: \$20,000. His talks usually stress teamwork, sacrifice, motivation—the philoso-

phies he developed while coaching the Lakers for nine seasons, during which he won four National Basketball Association championships and accumulated the best winning percentage in league history. His coaching career ended last season when he left the Lakers and joined NBC Sports as an in-studio host for the network's basketball coverage.

After most speeches, Riley says he knows when he has connected with his audience. But tonight in Newport Beach, despite the compliments, he has doubts. Following a

prolonged chicken-and-rice dinner, he had stepped to the podium to talk to a raucous gathering of real-estate brokers, bankers, home builders, and developers. Many of them seemed more impressed by his celebrity status than his abilities as a motivator. “An audience like this is on the fence. They are a little bit drunk, and you don't know where their heads are at,” Riley says, stopping to sip his rum-and-Coke. “These are the hardest crowds to work with. I don't know if I hit them.”

continued

SPEAKERS SECTION

He is beginning to wind down, talking candidly about where he went right and where he went wrong with his talk. Suddenly, another interruption. A skinny, bald-headed man dressed in a checkered, polyester jacket and with a stunning blonde attached to his right arm, breaks in between Riley and me. He pushes the blonde squarely up to Riley. "Hey, Pat," the man says, grinning, "how could you refuse an autograph to her?" His raised eyebrows point to the blond. Riley, cordial but forceful, says, "It has nothing to do with whether she is successful or beautiful. She is a living, human person." Having said that, he autographs her cocktail napkin.

The Making of a Motivator

Pat Riley possesses a look all men want, but few can handle. A look cultivated in Hollywood, and popularized on Madison Avenue. The kind of look that provokes unsolicited requests in hotel bars. Pat Riley, the guy with the confidently slicked-back hair. Pat Riley, the guy with impeccably tailored Armani suits. Pat Riley, Mr. *GQ*.

But is there any real substance behind the look?

When I headed west to meet Riley and discuss life as a speaker—a second career that earns him nearly \$750,000 a year—few people I spoke with were aware of his ability to stand in front of a crowd of 30 or 300 or 3,000 people and deliver a speech intended to motivate them toward better careers. "What does he talk about?" one friend asked. "About how Magic Johnson won him four NBA championships?"

Admittedly, I too wondered what made him such a demanded voice. As a basketball fan, I had followed his career and knew of his coaching success. A legitimate winner. But I also wondered about his reputed arrogant nature, his no-nonsense approach, his stand-offishness. In a January 1989 profile in *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, Riley seemed too self-centered and

calculating for his own good. Writer Dianne K. Shah described him as a "compulsive personality," "too organized," whose "obsessiveness borders on paranoia."

Riley has criticized the piece for miscasting him, but I still wondered: Does he possess the warmth to make people feel comfortable believing his message?

On a warm Monday in October, I arrive at Riley's home in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles. Realtors would call Brentwood, 10 minutes west of Beverly Hills, upscale, but Riley's two-level house seems modest for a celebrity, with a swinging picket gate leading to a small front yard overflowing with flowers. Yes, the house does



Pat Riley, known for his cool on the basketball sidelines, isn't afraid to raise his level of animation at the speaker's podium.

have trappings of stardom. In the backyard there is a swimming pool and a tennis court, as well as a small office that, among other things, houses three exercise machines and a TelePrompter. And it's Riley's personal secretary, Cindy, who escorts me from the front door to the living room.

While I wait for Riley, I glance at the array of photographs in his living room. There's no photo of Magic Johnson. Of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Of Jack Nicholson. Of the Laker Girls. The photos are of Riley with his young children, James and Elisabeth. Of Riley and his wife, Chris. Of Riley and his parents. On the piano, the sheet music to a child's version of "Silent Night" is open. On one couch Elisabeth's purple jumpsuit is strewn, and on the coffee table

lies a toy Riley had picked up for James in Barcelona, Spain, the site of his NBC debut two days earlier.

When Riley finally arrives, he's dressed in a red pullover, blue jeans, and white moccasins. Nothing Armani. A dark stubble lines his face, and his eyes are bloodshot, the lingering effect of the 16-hour flight from Barcelona. He looks worn out. He looks real. Pat Riley looks more like Mr. Mom than Mr. *GQ*.

While the Lakers work out in Inglewood preparing for the upcoming season, the first one in 14 years without him, Riley sits back in his living room couch, puts his feet up on the table, and talks easily.

About speaking. About motivating. About teamwork. And about Pat Riley.

"Right now I am going through some tremendous swings and emotions," he says. "The Lakers have been part of my life and my family for so long. Now I don't go to the office, I don't have practices to prepare for, I don't have players to motivate. I feel kind of awkward."

The last time Riley remembers feeling this way was the fall of 1976. The Lakers had cut the 31-year-old journeyman NBA guard, ending his

nine-year pro career. He had a wife and he had money, and he spent most days hanging around the beaches of Santa Monica playing volleyball and penning his thoughts. Pretty nice life, it would seem. But for Riley, it was directionless. He had no job, no professional motivation. "What bothered me the most was that I was part of something [the NBA], and then all of the sudden, I wasn't part of something," Riley recalls. "I didn't have a real place to connect with."

One year later, though, he returned to the Lakers as the team's radio broadcaster and traveling secretary. Two seasons later he was named an assistant to Laker head coach Paul Westhead. When Westhead fell out of favor with the team early in the 1981-82 sea-

son, Riley took over and guided the Lakers to the league championship. With the talent the Lakers possessed, many assumed a succession of titles would follow. They assumed wrong. The Lakers failed to make the championship round the next season, and then fell in seven games to the Boston Celtics in 1984. Instead of great, the Lakers were being labeled goats.

Riley would not allow the label to stick. During the off season, he went to work devising a means to make the team mentally prepared to go beyond their physical talent. A constant reader of motivational writers, from M. Scott Peck to General George Patton, Riley had his own philosophy ready for the beginning of next season.

"I didn't have a philosophy when I started coaching," he says, laughing and rubbing his right eye trying to keep the jet lag from overtaking. "That didn't develop until 1984, three years after I started coaching." His philosophy: In order for a team to succeed, its members must sacrifice their personal desires for the common good. Pretty simple, hardly revolutionary. Plato said the same thing 2500 years earlier. But in the fall of 1984, the Lakers—a group of high-priced, all-star talent—had forgotten the message. Riley had to make them remember.

"The basic premise of being part of a team is that a person has to get out of himself and get with the program, and through the players' voluntary cooperation, help with the team's ability to coordinate themselves," Riley says. "That's my philosophy. And what I brought to that team was this philosophy, and regardless of the kind of talent we had on that team I was able to nurture it. We communicated, and the players appreciated that."

He's sounding arrogant. Some players would say they won despite Riley's dictatorial rantings. Then again, his record backs him up. The Lakers won the NBA championship that season. In 1987 and 1988, they won again, becoming the first team in 19 years to capture consecutive titles. The team established itself as great, and Riley proved he could do more than coach—he could inspire, motivate.

Coincidentally, demand for him as a corporate and association

speaker also began to take off.

Throughout his playing and early coaching career, Riley occasionally would speak to a local civic group and tell a few funny locker room and travel stories for 30 minutes. Not until 1985, though, did anyone recognize him as a motivational speaker. That year, a computer company hired him to speak at a major sales meeting in Hawaii. Riley gave a colorful, humorous speech that brought laughs from the audience. He left the stage feeling good about his work. That is, until he ran into the man who hired him.

"The guy came up to me," Riley recalls, "and said, 'This is the most disappointed I have ever been.' I said, 'What do you mean? Everyone seemed to enjoy it.' 'Yeah, but it wasn't what I hired you to do. We hired you to come over here and do

RILEY KNOWS WHAT TO GIVE ATTENDEES: THE LOOK, THE STORIES, A TARGETED MESSAGE.

something specific—and you missed.' From that point on I knew I wasn't being hired to give a generic sports talk. I was supplying these people a service—take my record, my expertise of teamwork, the dynamics of being part of something, and relate that to the company's specific needs.

"That speech," he says, "was a breakthrough for me."

Since then, Riley has signed an exclusive speaking agreement with Promotional SportStars, a Beverly Hills-based speakers bureau representing, among others, Los Angeles Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda and University of Kentucky basketball coach Rick Pitino. He has spoken to more than 500 groups. And he has learned what to give his audience: The Armani look. A few very funny basketball stories. And, most importantly, a targeted message.

"It wasn't until I became a coach that I became a stereotype," Riley says of his fashion-plate reputa-

tion. "And at first, the look was more powerful than the substance. But I don't fight it. And maybe this speaking phenomenon is because I did catch a lot of people by surprise. They say, 'Hey, Riley does have a point a view and a message and a background. He can relate to our business.'"

But can he relate to people?

Coaching From A Different Stage

It's 7 p.m., and Pat Riley, wearing a dark black jacket that contrasts nicely with his gray slacks, maroon tie, and white shirt, stands in the middle of a tiny hospitality suite on the third floor of the Newport Beach Le Meridien Hotel. He is surrounded by the sponsors and special guests of tonight's monthly meeting of Southern California's Home Builders Council and Sales and Marketing Council.

Downstairs, nearly 600 home builders, contractors, escrow-account managers, and other real estate professionals are milling in the lobby sipping cocktails and laughing. They haven't had much to laugh about lately. For the first time in recent memory, real estate prices in Southern California are falling, and these people are worried. Houses stay on the market longer, and commission checks come less frequently. Some are thinking of leaving the business. This evening will give them a chance to talk about the soft market—and be motivated by Pat Riley. Most months, only about 200 people attend the dinner. But this evening, because of Riley, that number has tripled.

Back in the hospitality suite, Dave Lopez is thrilled. Lopez, the evening's program chairman, was responsible for booking Riley. "When I heard Pat was available, I went to my board and said we had to get him," says Lopez. The night before, Lopez spent nearly an hour with Riley discussing the real estate situation in Southern California. With that information, along with the newspaper clippings on real estate he has been collecting, Riley is ready for his audience.

First, though, he must make it through this pre-dinner reception. He has spent an hour posing for 50 or so photographs; in some his arm is around giggling women, in others he's shaking hands with speechless men. He answers their

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questions (Who's the best center in the NBA? "Patrick Ewing," he tells them. You miss coaching? "Only a little bit." How's TV? "Hard work.") and signs autographs. A woman asks him to autograph the cover of the January 1989 issue of *GQ* featuring Riley. "Oh no," he says, "that's the one that got me in trouble." I watch as people approach Riley easily, and I wonder. Did *GQ* misportray Riley, or is he so engaging because of the paycheck waiting for him at the end of the night?

After another half-hour of this socializing, Riley and followers make their way to the hotel ballroom where the 600 guests are already seated for dinner. When he walks through the middle of the room, heads turn. "God, he's good looking," one woman says as Riley breezes by her on the way to the head table.

Dinner takes forever, during which a white rap group sings a wrenching song. Door-prize winners are reeled off. Announcements about upcoming events and industry news given. And no one seems to be listening. People keep coming to Riley's table asking for an autograph or a photo or a handshake. He obliges everyone. His chicken-and-rice dinner will be only half eaten.

Finally, a little after 8:00, three hours after he arrived, and after a glowing five-minute introduction, Pat Riley goes to work. He gives his speech.

"I had a hard day struggling to figure out what I was going to talk to you about," he begins, "and after I spent the first thirty minutes here I knew what I had planned isn't going to work for this group." The crowd breaks up. They've connected with him. Now, can he connect with them?

After so many years of speaking, Riley is prepared for any occasion. He has five speaking themes that he interchanges according to the engagement. Considering the hard-pressed situation of this audience, Riley is ready with a talk on self-motivation during times of adversity.

"What's the difference between winning and success?" he asks the group. "Everyone in this audience tonight is successful, but there is always somebody who finds a way to go above and beyond just being

successful and becomes the winner. You're out there hearing all these failure messages right now. They come out every day with stories about how tough it is, how properties are not selling, and interest rates are soaring through the roof. Well then, how come there is always someone who wins? Why do some people find a way to go above and beyond a soft market while other people are listening to these failure messages?"

Over the next 45 minutes, he'll answer these questions by drawing on stories from his days with the Lakers. The one that carries the most weight concerns his 1985 team. He tells the audience that the Lakers had never won a championship series playing the Boston Celtics, and in the first game of that year's final round, Boston

"I WAS SURPRISED RILEY GAVE SUCH A GOOD SPEECH," ONE WOMAN SAYS. "IT WAS A GOOD PEP TALK."

won by 34 points on its home floor. The press ridiculed the Lakers, calling them pretenders. Before Game Two, again in Boston, Riley spoke to his 12 players. "Don't expect me, in this moment of truth for you, to inspire you. You have to go out and play these guys. Don't expect me to help you now." Riley pauses for a moment. "And wow, I don't know why somebody can break through, but those guys went out that day and won, 109 to 102." And then he reminds the audience that the team later won the series, a historical note that draws a short applause.

As he tells the story, I look around the room. The people's faces stare straight at him. He's captured them. While he occasionally tends to ramble, and use clichés a bit too often, he has them listening closely. A calculated one-liner sporadically breaks up a generally business-like delivery. He has a message, and expects the audience to hear it.

"Don't expect me to inspire you. Every now and then we all put our backs to the proverbial wall, and when that happens there is only one person you can depend on. Yourself. You can't expect to get help from anybody. That's the way it is in life. When it gets tough, it comes down to you."

When the speech ends, Riley receives a standing ovation. Then the crowd quickly breaks up, some people rushing for the exits, others waiting for the chance to have their picture taken with Riley. As Riley is engulfed, I spot three women staring at the scene. I ask one of them, a realtor from Rancho Santa Mirage, what she thought of his talk. "I was surprised he gave such a good speech," she says. "He was a little redundant and didn't say anything really new, but he brought us back to basics. It was a good pep talk." Later, Dave Lopez says, "I didn't expect Pat to be so accommodating. He went out of his way to do things our way."

In the hotel bar a few minutes later, Riley looks drained. He's still fighting the effects of the Barcelona trip, and this evening has been long.

And he's not quite sure if his message got through to these people.

But coaching taught him not to look back at bad nights.

Next week he speaks in Las Vegas, followed two days later with a speech in Hawaii.

We finish our drinks and head for the hotel exit, where a young fellow, a few months out of college and still without a job, is waiting for Riley. A basketball fan, he had come to the Le Meridien for fun, not motivation. "Mr. Riley?" Riley stops. "I just want to thank you for everything you did for me and my dad," the kid says. "We always enjoyed watching you and the Lakers."

"That's awfully nice of you to say," Riley says, shaking his hand. "Thanks a lot." The kid beams.

Outside the hotel, we exchange handshakes. Then Riley jumps into the back seat of his chauffeured Lincoln for the 60-minute ride back to Brentwood.

I don't know for sure, but I have a feeling that once on the road, he loosened his tie, took a deep breath, and caught a quick snooze. The man had earned his day's pay. ■

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