

Up Close

# Kidd's Play

*New Jersey Nets point guard Jason Kidd thrives as much on the golf course as he does on the fast break* **BY DAVE ALLEN**

**J**ason Kidd was literally caught in between clubs following the 2003 NBA season. A free agent for the first time in his nine-year career, the all-star point guard had narrowed his list of potential suitors to two teams: the New Jersey Nets, the once-perennial also-rans whom he had led to two consecutive NBA Finals appearances; and the San Antonio Spurs, the club which had defeated Kidd's Nets in six games in the Finals just weeks earlier.

RUSSELL KIRK/GOLFLINKS

Kidd is a focused floor general on the court for the Nets (right). At Manhattan Woods, he is friendly with the club's owner, Ken Lee (below).



Kidd, perhaps the fastest player in the NBA with a ball in his hands, couldn't get a good grip on this decision. While the Nets could offer him the biggest contract financially, the Spurs had Tim Duncan, a two-time NBA Most Valuable Player. Kidd had longed to play with one of the game's best big men, and the Spurs also played in the more up-tempo Western Conference, where Kidd had spent the first seven years of his career. But New Jersey had grown on Kidd during his two-plus seasons with the team.

"When I came here, I didn't have very high expectations," said Kidd, a native of Oakland, California, and an All-American at the University of California at Berkeley. "But it's just as pretty as anyplace else. It has the city and the mountains. I fell in love with the different towns and the people have been great to me."

The Met Area also offered something else San Antonio could not.

"It has the best golf in the country, I think," said Kidd. "I've been 'America's Guest' to a lot of different courses. I learned that from Rod [Nets President Rod Thorn]. I've played both Trump courses, Hamilton Farm, Baltusrol, Winged Foot, and Somerset Hills. I have the opportunity to play those a lot."

In fact, Kidd, a 7-handicap ("I'm trying to

bring it back up because I'm in all the wrong games," he jokes), was meeting with Thorn at Trump National Golf Club in Briarcliff Manor in the summer of 2003 when he agreed to terms with the Nets on a six-year, \$103 million deal. "Normally, we don't ever talk about basketball when we're playing golf," says Thorn. "That is the one day when we were, of course. Jason was torn, and I was trying to do what I could to get him to stay [with the Nets]."

Thorn didn't have to win a back-nine press to get Kidd's signature on a new contract, he just had to promise Kidd that he would do everything possible to put a championship-caliber team on the court in New Jersey. That, and continue to get Kidd on many of the area's best courses.

"We came to an agreement and then went out and played golf," said Kidd. "I was very close to going to San Antonio, but I felt like New Jersey could get back [to the Finals] and that it'd be our turn to win."

The Nets failed to reach the Finals in 2004 and 2005, then lost to the eventual champion Miami Heat in the second round of last year's playoffs. But Kidd and Thorn continue to bond off the court in one of the more unusual player-president relationships in sports. They frequently tee it up together during the summer, shuffling back and forth between the Country Club of Purchase, where Thorn is a member, and Kidd's home club, Manhattan Woods. Thorn remarks, "He's really improved his golf game. We used to play pretty evenly, but now he has to give me strokes!"

Kidd estimates he plays about four rounds per week during the summer months and rarely, if ever, practices. His best round at Manhattan Woods to date is a 78, but like a typical point guard, he's most proud of the fact that he can make the trip from his Saddle River, New Jersey, home to Manhattan Woods in Nyack in less than 20 minutes. "All back roads," says Kidd.

On this particular day, a Tuesday morning in late September, Kidd is especially anxious to play because preseason practice starts in just six days. But golf will have to wait until the following morning, as Kidd has a birthday party to attend later in the afternoon for his twin daughters, Miah and Jazelle. He'll get another round in on Friday before stowing the clubs away for the basketball season. Kidd, who is third in NBA history in career triple-doubles with 82 through January 16, will put the lessons he's learned on the golf course to



Kidd has improved as a golfer, and exhibits a deft touch around the greens.

good use during the long, grueling NBA season. He often takes a golf course mentality to the hardwood.

“You’re having a particularly bad round, are you going to quit or keep plugging along?” asks Kidd. “Maybe somewhere down the line you make a putt and that’s what gets you started. When things are going in a bad direction on the basketball court, I’ll often use golf from a mental standpoint to toughen myself up. You don’t fold the tent. You buckle down and try and find a way to turn the tide.”

As a point guard, Kidd’s job is to orchestrate the offense and make sure his teammates

— especially Vince Carter and Richard Jefferson — get the ball in position to score. Few players do it better: Kidd ranked second in the NBA in assists per game (9.4) through January 16, and currently ranks seventh all-time in career assists with more than 8,300. On the golf course, Kidd approaches each hole much like he sees the floor of a basketball court.

“When you tee off, you look at the entire hole. What is your objective, and where do you want to put the ball [for the best approach]?” says Kidd. “Then you work forward.”

A playground legend in Oakland, Kidd was introduced to golf by a high school teammate who also happened to play on the golf squad. Kidd tagged along on one trip and started hitting balls. “I thought, ‘Hey, this is an easy game, the ball doesn’t even move,’” said Kidd.

Kidd didn’t become hooked on the game, though, until several years later, when he was traded from the Dallas Mavericks to the Phoenix Suns early in the 1996-’97 season. The Suns head coach at the time, Danny Ainge, was an avid golfer. So were many of his teammates, including Rex Chapman and Steve Nash, the two-time reigning NBA Most Valuable Player. As soon as practice ended, Kidd and his teammates were often seen fast-breaking their way to Scottsdale, where an abundance of four-star courses awaited them. In fact, Kidd would often show up at practice wearing his golf attire,

just in case practice ended early. It often did — provided someone could make a half-court shot.

“I remember Toby Bailey was always the one who’d go out and make it, so we’d be on our way to the golf course,” said Kidd.

It was in Scottsdale where Kidd shot his career-best round, a 75, at Talking Stick Golf Club. Kidd, Frank Johnson (a Suns’ assistant coach at the time) and Lloyd Parker, a former vice president with America West Airlines, teed it up at six o’clock one morning. After logging 36 holes in the hot desert sun, Johnson headed for home but Kidd and Parker decided to play another 18 holes using two balls. It was on Kidd’s ‘A’ ball that he shot the 75.

“That’s the most I’ve played in one day,” said Kidd, who also struck up a close friendship with Phil Mickelson while he lived in Arizona. “We played a whole tournament in less than a day. I was a little tired, so I wasn’t trying to kill the ball. I was just trying to keep it in play and make it happen. Afterwards, I was like, ‘Man, maybe I should play 36 holes before I tee it up with you guys next time.’”

When he was with the Suns, Kidd played golf before practice, after practice, anytime he could. He had that look of wanting to play all the time. Ainge recognized it, and asked Kidd to cut back his golf during the season to one or two rounds per week.

Living in the colder climate of New Jersey, Kidd doesn’t have much opportunity to play during the season, which he now appreciates. “You need the break because you do get burnt out after awhile,” says Kidd. Still, Kidd has been known to play an “emergency” 18 every now and then during the season, if the opportunity presents itself. During one particularly poor West Coast road trip last season, Kidd, frustrated with his team’s performance the night before, decided to “blow off some steam” on a Los Angeles golf course and was late for the team bus.

Kidd walked on the bus still toting his golf bag on his shoulders.

“Coach [Lawrence] Frank said to just call him next time, so he knows what I’m doing,” muses Kidd.

Either that, or Kidd will make sure his golf buddy, Thorn, is along with him.

“As long as you’re with the team president, you can’t go wrong,” says Kidd. Wise words, from America’s Guest. ■

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