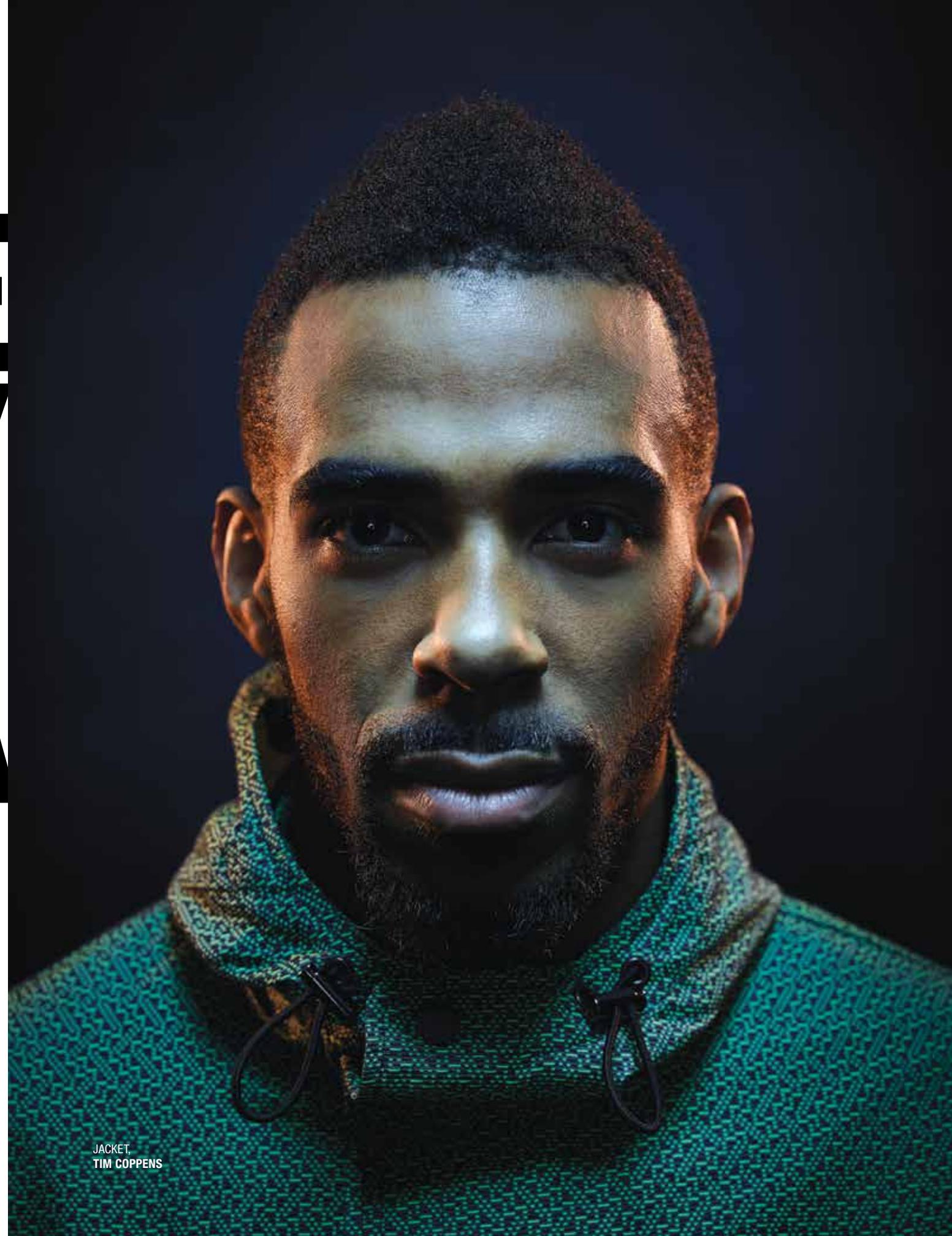


LEADER OF THE PACK

**FROM FRESH-FACED
FRESHMAN TO
GRIZZLY VETERAN,
MIKE CONLEY HAS
BECOME THE FACE
OF THE MEMPHIS
FRANCHISE.**

*BY JOHN MIHALY
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Mike Conley doesn't read about himself. It seems that any story that features him or his Memphis Grizzlies team always seem to add the words "underrated" or "overlooked."

But how do you overlook a player who was the son of an Olympic gold medalist? A top college star who led his team to the NCAA Championship game as a freshman and was selected fourth overall in the 2007 NBA Draft? A starting point guard for a team that's made the playoffs for the past five seasons while posting 50 or more wins in the last three?

"Oh man, I'm tired of hearing the words. I really am," Conley says. "I've been hearing it for about four years now. I think eventually, that label has to drop at some point. I think it will soon."

This season marked the Grizzlies twentieth year in the league (the first six played in Vancouver). And even after two decades, the franchise still seems a bit of a mystery to a national audience. Lack of national exposure surely plays a role in the team's quiet profile. The franchise only played nine nationally televised games this season. (By comparison, the Los Angeles Clippers and Oklahoma Thunder had a league leading 32 games each.) "It is a little bit tougher to get your name out there when you're in a smaller market. It's been a blessing for me to be here because it's got such a family atmosphere," Conley says. "It's a small city so the opportunity for me to do things in the community locally has been great."

Having played the entirety of his eight-year career as a point guard in Memphis, Conley is ready to be the face of a franchise that is ready for prime time. "I'm the guy who's been here the longest," Conley says. "I think I might be the longest tenured player in the franchise's history. (He is, having played 581 games and counting for the franchise.) I'm a Memphis Grizzly as deep as it goes. I bleed blue right now."

As the point guard of the team, his leadership role is that much greater. Since the NBA rules have evolved to allow less hand checking, the advantage seems to have shifted toward quality ball handlers. Whereas in the past, a great big man could lead your team to glory, teams have realized that you now need a productive point guard to go for the gold. Conley

understands that in this era, there is never going to be a night off for a point guard.

When pressed about the rival that pushes to Conley to elevate his game, he offers two names—Chris Paul and Russell Westbrook. "I see them so often, especially in the playoffs, and I get to face them at the peak of their game," he says. "That's when I'm trying to show that I can compete with those guys. You would think that it would get easier when you play someone so often that you know what they are going to do. But it gets tougher and tougher. Each year, guys who are already at an elite level are continually getting better by getting stronger and healthier with new moves in their repertoire. There's never really a time when you think, 'OK, you've got this guy under control.' It's always what's next, what has he added and what do I need to scout on him now?"

As fierce a competitor as Conley is, you'll never see him tear apart his jersey as teammate Marc Gasol did earlier this season. "I'll never get close," Conley says. "That's a very hard thing to do. I don't know how he did that!"

But there is one way to tell when Conley is not to be messed with, a way that fits his silent assassin persona. "When I'm fired up," he says. "I don't even talk. I'm quiet and locked in. If my teammates talk to me, I don't answer. They know I'm pumped, in the moment and focused."

Despite his quiet demeanor, Conley knows that it's time to speak up. The team has been successful, but you can only stay underrated for so long. At some point, you have to be properly rated as champions. "We have a sense of urgency about ourselves that we have to win now," he says. "We're a team that's getting up there in age, and we've got a lot of guys who have played a lot of games in this league. We've built this thing for my whole career, which is eight years now. It's been a grind for us, so we have to realize that this is our time right now. There's no better time for us to go win one." ■

BLAZER, PUBLIC
SCHOOL; SWEATER,
ETRO



SHIRT, **MISSONI**;
PANTS, **BERLUTI**;
NECKLACE,
DAVID YURMAN;
WATCH, **HUBLLOT**



JACKET, SHIRT, PANTS
AND SHOES, **CALVIN
KLEIN**; BRACELETS,
DAVID YURMAN