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Jackson's whereabouts unknown for next year

■ **NBA:** Negotiations between the Bulls' coach and owner have stalled

CHICAGO (AP) — The New Jersey Nets, spurned by Rick Pitino, want Phil Jackson. The Philadelphia 76ers, with a new owner, new building — and new money — are interested. The Portland Trail Blazers? Perhaps.

Jackson tries to laugh off the rumors he's heard about his future.

He's preparing the only NBA team he's ever coached for the championship series, and he doesn't want anything to distract the Chicago Bulls from successfully finishing the best season in league history.

"It's going to be full of rumors," Jackson said of the speculation-filled time surrounding the NBA Finals. "It should be fun."

Wrapping up his seventh season, pro basketball's career leader in winning percentage is finally getting recognition.

He was named coach of the year for the first time after his team went 72-10 during the regular season. And the Bulls are 11-1 heading into Wednesday night's opener of the NBA Finals against the Seattle SuperSonics.

He's got Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen and a well-behaved Dennis Rodman.

Yet all isn't perfect in Jackson's world.

He'll be a free agent after the season and negotiations with Bulls owner Jerry Reinsdorf have stalled. The more time passes, the more money other coaches get — or turn down — and the more sticky Jackson's talks with Reinsdorf become.

Pitino rejected a compensation package that reportedly approached \$30 million and included part ownership of the Nets.

Jackson, at \$850,000 this season, may be the biggest coaching bargain in sports.

"He gets a tremendous response from his players," longtime assistant Tex Winter said. "He's demanding, very authoritative, and yet they're willing to accept this. That's very unusual

in pro ball, where you've got so many egos and superstars."

His players agree.

Jordan: "There's never been a better coach."

Pippen: "We trust Phil."

Rodman: "He gives you space to be yourself."

A former flower child who admits he took drugs in the 1960s, Jackson now looks like a long, lanky professor.

His gray-speckled beard, his round wire-rimmed glasses and his soft-spoken manner in discussing his "Zen Christian" beliefs make him instantly likable.

His coaching philosophy?

"You've never seen a jockey carry a horse across the line," he said. "You've got to understand that you're leading a group that's got its own energy level. The gentle prodding and corrections and guidance that you do as a rider is very important because if you jerk the reins or run him too hard, you'll be in a lot of danger."

Jackson's philosophy works — with this team.

He acknowledges that he might not be the right man for rebuilding situations like New Jersey and Philadelphia. After all, Jackson inherited Jordan and Pippen in 1989.

Nevermind that the Bulls' stars never won a title in previous seasons: Jackson merely did what he was expected to do — win.

He clearly wants to stay in Chicago. He has a strong ally in Jordan, who also needs a new contract after this season.

Basketball's best player wants to remain in Chicago — for the right price, believed to be in excess of \$18 million a year — but only if Jackson stays, too.

"I can't say I'll follow him" to a rebuilding team, Jordan said. "But if that's what he wants, and if that's the best thing for him, great. I'll probably retire. I don't know."

That's a considerable vote of support.

"I don't know of any professional player who's said something like that in public," Jackson said. "That's a strong statement."

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