

THE DENVER POST

NUGGETS IN TURMOIL

A three-part series on the Nuggets' 2005-06 season, which featured a division championship followed by a postseason meltdown.

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Part 1 of 3

The 2005-06 Nuggets season, once full of promise and huge expectation, died in a swirl of dysfunction and a first-round playoff loss to the Los Angeles Clippers. And that disorder was planted in the playoffs one year earlier.

On the night before the team's 2005 playoff series against San Antonio, coach **George Karl** gathered a handful of personnel - minus then general manager Kiki Vandeweghe - in one of the team's hotel rooms and asked a piercing, stunning question. According to Nuggets officials who were in the room, Karl wanted to know: "Who are you with, Kiki or me?"

And he surveyed the room seeking individual answers.

Karl disputes that characterization of the meeting. But that night and Nuggets owner Stan Kroenke's failed contract talks with Vandeweghe following the playoff loss to the Spurs were the origins of the divisiveness that marked this past Nuggets' season, team employees say.

A season that produced the Nuggets' first division title since 1987-88 was littered with bouts of self-preservation extending from management to coaches to players. It ended with a frustrating third consecutive loss in the first round of the playoffs.

In this three-day series, The Post explores the highs and lows of the Nuggets' season, one in which the atmosphere around the team became one of paranoia. Kenyon Martin's rocky relationship with Karl and some teammates fueled the discord. Through all that, team officials see a bright future.

The series is the result of interviews with several Nuggets players - each of whom except Martin requested anonymity - with Kroenke, Nuggets coaches and front-office personnel, NBA player agents, NBA executives, and coaches and scouts who disclosed conversations they had with persons throughout the Nuggets' organization.

"It was frustrating," one Nuggets player said about the season's chaos. "It was always there. Like a cloud."

Karl explains the meeting in San Antonio before last year's playoffs this way:

"I had dinner watching the playoffs before we played our playoff game in San Antonio. There were eight or nine people there. We were in a hotel suite. There were coaches, trainers, other staff. Me telling the group are you with Kiki or are you with me? I never wanted any part of that. I told everyone at the dinner and on our staff that you can only serve one general. You may have two bosses. But you can only have one general.

"Now, that might be interpreted for something else. You could take that and throw a log on a fire. That is what people sometimes do."

Karl said that when he took over in the middle of the 2004-05 season, he learned quickly Vandeweghe, former coach Jeff Bzdelik and Kroenke had not been in sync.

"(They) had been miles apart. I tried to bring Kiki and the owner together. There was a break. Bringing Doug Moe in as an assistant coach was a big part of bringing things together."

Once the Nuggets were toppled by San Antonio in five games, Vandeweghe and Kroenke continued contract talks. Both appeared interested in not having Vandeweghe enter the 2005-06 season in the final year of his five-year deal.

But as the summer wore on, Kroenke heard reports Vandeweghe and his representatives were talking to the media about the negotiations. This irked Kroenke, a team official said. Then Kroenke learned Vandeweghe had talked to media members about private team business, particularly about a Nuggets' attempted deal for Washington Wizards guard Gilbert Arenas that Kroenke had supposedly nixed.

That incensed Kroenke, who has adamantly denied getting in the way of signing Arenas.

The contract talks abruptly ended. Once Kroenke cut talks with Vandeweghe last summer,

Kroenke's friend and confidant, Bret Bearup, a financial adviser, began having an increased presence in everything Nuggets. During most of the past season, Nuggets front-office people say, Vandeweghe's communication with Kroenke had to flow through Bearup.

The friction at the top filtered down through the organization. A Nuggets season marked by injuries, mistrust, drama and chaos ensued.

Fragmentation of Nuggets

Injuries, player rebellion and outright freakish things fragmented the Nuggets much of last season.

They played 62 games without two or more of their top 10 players. Center Nene missed 81 of the 82 regular-season games when he blew out his right knee in the season opener.

Voshon Lenard refused to enter a game in the final seconds of a November game versus New Orleans/Oklahoma City. Martin, after an expletive-laced outburst at coaches and players, was suspended after Game 2 of the playoffs. Ruben Patterson was benched for Game 5 of the playoffs after a blowup at Karl.

Rookie guard Julius Hodge was shot three times while driving his car on Interstate 76 in early April. Karl battled his own cancer scare and another with his son, Coby. Karl was suspended by the league for the season's first two games and, later, for two more.

Meanwhile, players grumbled privately about management's mistrust of each other, players' mistrust of each other and about Carmelo Anthony's star status. Karl is perceived as heavy-handed and rude in dealing with the players.

They complained about Martin's injuries and antics, about Anthony whispering that the talent around him was ill-conceived, about Earl Boykins' frequent and errant long shots and about Boykins being a "snitch" for Karl, and about point guard Andre Miller's too-deliberate style.

Thus far, the fallout has fallen squarely on Vandeweghe, who left soon after the season after meeting with Kroenke. Vandeweghe declined several interview requests for this series.

"We had high expectations, healthy ones, way high," a Nuggets player said. "But the atmosphere all year was real bad. The division started with **George** and Kiki and Stan and whatever the role was for Bret Bearup. Everybody in the whole franchise took on the attitude that they had to be loyal to somebody.

"There was too much off-the-court stuff and it started at the top. Whose side are you on? Kiki? We knew he was not going to be here. **George** and Stan and Bret will be here. All of the people Kiki brought in, they are being looked at now and wondering: Can we trust you?"

The Nuggets were 8-8 in November, 6-9 in December and 11-5 record in January. They finished strong to win their first division title in 18 years, with a 44-38 regular-season record.

Given the injuries, and the turmoil, those are monumental accomplishments, a Nuggets official said. Given that Karl had led the team to a 32-8 record upon taking over in 2004-05, following Michael Cooper, who replaced Bzdelik, how could Karl now be the culprit, the official asked.

"We had most of the year with seven or eight guys practicing," the official said, requesting anonymity. "We went through hell this year. We had a great basketball team considering all the injuries we had. Considering we were a team that could not shoot a jump shot. I'd have no problem with Karl coaching me. This team has had three different coaches with a sob story from the players on each one. Guys are making excuses. They are running a con. This was a funky, unusual year. These players were immature."

Dictator to manager

Karl entered this season with his goal of winning the Northwest Division. He knew his team had yet to learn how to win in the playoffs after consecutive first-round losses.

He called the months of November and December two of the toughest on the schedule. Yet, he said, his team survived, despite losing Nene, taking the "hammer" out of his hands, he said. He took blame for his suspensions, the first for attending offseason workouts of college players, including his son, that the league had not sanctioned, the second for criticizing officials.

"Losing Nene, I had to move from a dictator to a manager," Karl said. "A coaching year goes to a managing year. The cancers, those were tough psychological hills to climb. My staff had to pick me up more than they should have. I can't deny at times I was not operating on a full tank. I had to persevere through it. Injuries were the most consistent thing about the season. In November and December, when Marcus Camby and Earl went down, we were playing without four of our top guys. I didn't want that excuse.

"The magnifying glass is strong. The season had way too much drama. It takes energy out of it. It takes away the chance to play physically at a very intense level. A lot of times we walked off the court last year and had not played with enough energy. There was way too much drama. You can bitch about it or fix it. We fixed it enough to win a division championship. We fixed it enough to move forward."

He credits his players for "fighting hard to keep the ship in a good place."

Several Nuggets officials, though, said Karl talked too frequently about Vandeweghe's contract situation to the media early in the season, fanning flames. Karl disagrees.

"Kiki and I had three or four good conversations on where he was. I did not see a window open for him here. Could I have done more? Yeah. I walked away. I did not want to be in that. Kiki and I had a good relationship. Stan and I had a good relationship. I did not want to (upset) either one. What do you want me to do in a situation like that? Maybe I was in a lose/lose situation.

"I did not spend a lot of time with Stan. Stan was happy with that. Stan's a tough man, a demanding man. I am one of his soldiers. One of his generals. I think I tried. I walked away and said both of you are battling in the media game, the players' game, the ego game."

Karl has said he wants to be involved in decision making, but does not want to be general manager.

Kroenke's view

Kroenke has a different view of his relationship with Bearup and Vandeweghe. The owner only agreed to answer questions that were e-mailed to him. Asked why his communication with Vandeweghe last season was delegated through Bearup, he denied that was the case.

"Bret is a close friend of the organization who is respected in many basketball circles," Kroenke said in an e-mail response. "Kiki and Bret have been friends for years and have confided in each other in the past. But at no point was communication between Kiki and I delegated through Bret."

Bearup said: "As you know, I have been around a while, and it has been increasing in the past couple of years. It certainly did increase this year. It was never anything said by Stan. It was never anything like that. I'm not here to say communication from Kiki to Stan was not through me. But it was not mandated by Stan."

Whether it was mandated, several people in the Nuggets' organization said that's the way it worked.

"Bret Bearup had a presence in the building, everywhere," Karl said. "He hung around a lot. I

can't deny that was it (that Vandeweghe communicated to Kroenke only through Bearup). That was the feeling I got. I can't say where that line of communication completely was. That was something I did not have the ability to fix."

Bearup, who describes himself as an investment adviser for several groups - particularly athletes - said he helps Kroenke "in any way I can to make the Nuggets successful" and that he is an adviser to Kroenke "when he wants my advice."

Kroenke does not believe there is a consensus among his franchise that having Bearup around his team without an official title causes confusion or a "who's side are you on" atmosphere or "can we trust you" feel permeating the organization.

"I am not sure what consensus you are speaking of," Kroenke said in an e-mail response. "Everyone in our organization is committed to winning and there is no time for separate agendas or in-fighting. Our entire organization is focused on making next season the best in Nuggets history. Everyone is excited about working together, defending our division title and rewarding our fans for their continued support."

Bearup said: "It's not Kiki's camp or **George's** camp or Bearup's camp. It's a Denver Nuggets camp. I understand the situation that gave rise to people thinking that. It was because Kiki's contract was up in the same year."

Karl, asked about the "can we trust you" notion within the organization, said, "I think that's human nature. I think there are people in the building that it may take five years or so for me to build that kind of trust. I don't know who is going to survive here. Stan is going to make those decisions. Bret is going to consult him on it. I don't have a major say on that or view."

"He's right," Bearup said.

The Nuggets' 11 victories in January buoyed Karl and his team. But at the end of that month they were routed 105-87 at home and 112-79 on the road on consecutive nights by the Clippers.

Karl said: "That shocked us. Hit us hard."

It was a prelude to February.

A 5-5 month.

A month Karl described in this fashion: "Way too much drama. Way too much off the basketball court and not on it, coupled with injuries. So much drama."

Much of it revolved around Martin.

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The third quarter was rolling. Kenyon Martin was stewing.

It was April 24, Game 2 of the Nuggets' playoff series against the Clippers in Los Angeles. The teams were playing, but Martin was in the locker room. He finally slogged to the bench and found a seat and placed a towel over his head.

He was trying to hide a swollen face from tears shed.

He was hoping to hide his anger. His pain. A day later, he would be suspended, in all likelihood ending his career in Denver.

For the first time publicly, Martin tells his story of what happened at halftime of that game and what led coach **George** Karl to suspend him for the rest of the series. Martin describes how that halftime fiasco, in his view, was not an isolated incident but the culmination of friction between himself and his coach and teammates.

"**George** never told me I was not going to play," said Martin, who played 6 minutes, 55 seconds during the first half of that game. "I was shocked. He put me in the last of the first quarter. He put me in late in the second quarter. Both times for just small minutes. I'm sitting there thinking any minute I'm going back in the game. We were getting down further and further. I was (upset).

"I went to the locker room at halftime. I had made up my mind. I couldn't take it anymore. I had had all I could take. Here this was happening in the biggest moment of the season. I told **George** he didn't have to play me. I went off. Maybe I handled the situation wrong. But look what led to that."

What led to it, said Martin, was a season in which he practiced and played sporadically after undergoing micro-fracture surgery on his left knee in May 2005. A season in which he was treated as if he were faking pain to avoid practice, a season of discontent with Karl and some teammates.

"The thing happened with **George** in the hallway," Martin said. "The coaches were in the hallway talking about the game. It was not an exchange. It was me talking and the coaches

listening. I had my say to **George**. Then I went into the locker room and had my say with the players. Yes, it was full of cuss words both times.

"Any teammate that does not understand that does not know how it feels to want to play and they don't play you. I could have shut it down halfway through the season. My doctors said I should have. I was trying to be competitive for the team and the season. Look where it ended up."

Grgurich helps situation

Nuggets assistant coach Tim Grgurich played a vital role in saving face the rest of the night, for Martin and the franchise. It was Grgurich who convinced Martin to return to the bench. And though Martin didn't re-enter the game, at least his appearance on the bench avoided further embarrassment for the team.

The Nuggets reported after the game, in what was an obvious lie, that Martin did not play in the second half because of a bruised left knee.

Martin credits Grgurich with defusing a volatile situation.

"Coach Grgurich stayed with me in the locker room," Martin said. "I understand team play. I am not a quitter by any means. He said: 'Don't do this to the team. Guys need you. Guys need you. And if you don't go out there, I'm not going, either. I'm going to stay right here with you.' I had taken off my jersey, tape, socks, shoes. This man picked them all up for me and gave them to me. It hurt real bad. I appreciated what he did."

"As the second half started, I was in no shape to go back. I had to calm down. I was angry, hurt, frustrated. I did come back and sat on the bench with the towel over my head. I didn't want anyone to see the emotion. Of course, it was tough to hide. My mom knew."

The Martin blowup was symbolic of a troubled organization with tension in the relationships, from the owner to the general manager to the coach to the players.

The bottom line in the Martin-Karl drama is Karl was told by the team's medical staff Martin was cleared to practice and play from the season's start.

Martin insists he was cleared to play for careful minutes early in the season in order to build strength but suffered severe pain in his knee early in the season. He said he reinjured his knee when he fell on it in practice in early February but throughout the season was treated as if he were faking pain.

Bret Bearup, a confidant and adviser of Nuggets owner Stan Kroenke's, offered this about Martin and Karl: "You've got two people with two different views. Who is to say who is right and who is wrong? I think there is enough blame to go around."

Martin at odds with Karl

One of Martin's teammates offered this harsh analysis of the Nuggets' highest-paid player: "Kenyon was not playing a lot but was in the locker room encouraging guys to 'get tough, get ready.' We were listening and thinking of a guy who was out partying last night, on his feet, but does not practice and play. There is the perception that Kenyon does not want to be a professional. Are you really hurt? Kenyon is obnoxious, ignorant, boisterous."

Karl said at the start of the season that Martin was cleared to play, so he played him.

"I tried to focus with Kenyon, and I talked to him many times," Karl said. "I am here to manage my basketball team and not his ego. Is that right or is that wrong? I tried to fit Kenyon in. The medical reports? That is something for the medical people to speak about. I let them tell me and I go with what they tell me. I knew that Kenyon was not 100 percent. I never expected that of him. I don't think I bashed Kenyon in the media. I tried to support him as much as any player I worked with."

The Martin-Karl relationship seemed doomed from early last season when in a morning shootaround before an evening game, Martin sat. Karl asked him if he was going to work.

Martin replied, "You can have me now, or you can have me later."

Karl answered: "I'll have you now. We'll see about later."

Their relationship appeared to go downhill from that day.

Listen to their juxtaposing views about a Jan. 18 home victory over Cleveland during which Martin, in 37 minutes, scored 16 points and grabbed 17 rebounds. Afterward, Karl complained to the media about his team's lack of rebounding.

Martin: "I was a little perturbed about the situation. I felt I played (hard). I understand the coach being upset we did not close it (out) at the end like we should have. But for a coach to say that was not the thing to say. He might have said it to the press and he definitely said it in the locker room. He said guys weren't rebounding. He said to Marcus Camby, 'I can't wait 'til you get back, big fella.'"

"The next day was a day off. The following day we were at practice, a shootaround. **George** comes over. I told him, 'I don't want to talk to you, you know, I don't rebound the ball. I'm not going to say anything to you.' I get up and walk over to (then general manager) Kiki (Vandeweghe). **George** comes over to me again. I said: 'I don't want to talk to you. Go talk to Marcus. He's your rebounder.'"

Karl said: "When I talked to the media and the team after the game, it was to let them know that overall our rebounding had to improve. I understood Kenyon was upset about it and took it personally. I went to Kenyon a day or two later and tried to talk to him about it. It didn't work."

He was in a mood about it. How I handled it was a mistake. I thought I was doing that in a jovial way.

"I look at coaching, at my team, like a triangle. Kenyon is one player and there are 15 at the base of that triangle. I do not just manage Kenyon. I manage the whole basketball team. It's not about the best player. It's about the best team. We need to have a better basketball team. Players and coaches and all."

An up-and-down season

Martin's season was a roller coaster of games played and games missed, with the reasons listed for him missing games most often being left knee tendinitis and left knee contusion.

"My season began with micro-fracture surgery that happened three days after we lost to San Antonio in the playoffs," Martin said. "The surgery was serious. It's serious anytime they put a hole in your bone.

"I rehabbed for about six weeks. For training camp, they told me everything was fine. In early October, I started to have pain again. It was similar to the pain before the surgery. I told them, but as the season went on, it wasn't really acknowledged. They treated me like I was faking it. There were little things being said. I tried to be professional about it. I wasn't always professional about certain situations. As the season went on, we had come to the conclusion, especially Kiki, that I couldn't practice. Yet, it was still being said that I didn't practice."

Martin and his agent, Brian Dyke, in November sought a second medical opinion on Martin's left knee. That revealed, both said, an opinion that Martin should sit out until after the all-star break in late February.

But with center Nene injured and gone for the season, and Camby out for 24 of 28 games, from Dec. 15 through Jan. 25, with a right pinkie fracture, Martin said he played through pain to help the team.

"I did not get to this point in my career by not practicing and working on my game," Martin said. "When I first got here as a Nugget, I was the first guy out there at practice. I was healthy then and felt good, and I worked on my game and got better."

Before a home game against Portland on Feb. 4, Martin fell on his surgically repaired left knee in practice. He missed that game. He said it set him back for the rest of the regular season but he could have played more in the playoffs.

"I'm a competitor," Martin said. "I wanted to play. I know my knee, how it feels. I was brought to Denver to play basketball. My knee did not allow me to do that. No one on that team should ever question how I work and the work I do."

Asked about rumors of his clubbing, then not practicing, Martin said: "You ask the people I go out with. When I do go out, I have a table reserved when I go and find me a seat. I don't like people bothering me. I find a seat. Me being on my feet? It was not like I was always in the middle of the dance floor all night. I don't run the clubs, but when I did go it was just to blow off steam."

He said he played not to justify his \$92.5 million contract but to help the team.

"I put pressure on myself," Martin said. "The money, I earned that. I put more pressure on myself than anybody and not because of the money. I am my biggest critic. I put all the pressure on myself."

Of the perception Vandeweghe tried to nurture him, while Karl was not interested in that, Martin said: "Kiki did not nurture me. I'm a grown man. I didn't need nurturing."

About Karl managing his ego, Martin said, "If he has to manage my ego, he has to manage his ego as well."

And about his teammate who described him as obnoxious, ignorant and boisterous?

"That is his own shortcomings," Martin said. "He's not a man. He's a coward."

Martin: "I'm no angel"

When Karl talks about "drama" engulfing the Nuggets this past season, Martin was in the thick of it. There was an incident in which Martin did not wear a proper sports coat, according to the NBA, and fumed about not being allowed to sit on the bench. There was a Christmas party he threw where only a handful of players showed up and Martin supposedly was upset. Martin said he threw the party for guys who did not have families in town and needed a place to go.

More angst was created when two Nuggets fans said Martin sent a friend into the stands after one of them heckled Martin during a Feb. 8 home loss to Chicago, a charge the Nuggets denied. After the game, multiple witnesses said Martin cursed near fans. He later was fined \$15,000 by the NBA.

Martin's struggles with the Nuggets, his rambunctious play and attitude can be traced to his first season in Denver, 2004-05. The Nuggets worked a deal for him from New Jersey because they wanted to toughen their team. They wanted the "beast" that is Kenyon Martin, a Nuggets official said.

It didn't take long for Martin to be noticed.

"When Kenyon first came, it got off like this," said a teammate. "Nene has always bullied people. He does it with his elbows. He did it to Kenyon. Kenyon said, 'You do it again, it's me and you.' Nene did it again. Kenyon popped him in the eye. And the coaches loved it. They had never had that before. We needed that element. We weren't tough. Kenyon was a bullet. We went

out and got Kenyon to get that. Kenyon is not going to let anyone bully his team."

In the end, though, it appears what the Nuggets sought from Martin helped turn the team inside out.

That is Karl's view.

"I heard that story," said Karl, who was not coaching the Nuggets then. "That might have been the beginning of the problem. A lot of everything that has happened might be rooted in that story."

Karl has not talked to Martin since the blowup at halftime of Game 2 of the playoff series. It's believed the team is actively shopping for a trade.

"I will not talk to Kenyon right away," Karl said in an interview the first week of June. "But we will talk before the draft (June 28). My belief is with emotion you make bad decisions. My dad taught me that. Right now, I am probably still too emotional about it. Kenyon probably is, too."

Martin answered, "I have nothing to say to **George**."

This is a player and a franchise that appear bound to split.

"I'm no angel in this by any means," Martin said. "Maybe I could have handled it better. I can take responsibility for that. I can look in the mirror and say I messed up. My outburst in the playoffs. The rebounding thing, I could have handled it better, talked to him. I could have handled it better, but I didn't.

"On and off the court there were a lot of things. I thought this organization was about winning basketball games and at the end of the day trying to win an NBA championship. Put basketball first. I didn't have to play at the beginning of the season, but I did for those reasons. I didn't want to be the bad guy in this. I made a situation worse, but I don't think you can fault someone for wanting to play in the playoffs or play the game they love."

Martin spoke for this series after initially declining to be interviewed. He decided to give his views after his teammates and other members of the organization offered theirs.

Because of that, Dyke, his agent, insisted upon issuing this statement:

"I told Stan Kroenke more than a month ago that we would be professional and try to handle this matter as professionally as possible, and I'm somewhat disappointed that his own organization was not able to do that."

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More trouble brewed for the Nuggets in the season's second half. After their .500 record in February, the team enjoyed its best month in March.

With newly acquired Reggie Evans and Ruben Patterson aboard and a renewed effort to coalesce, they went 11-5 in March. Included was a 5-2 road trip, best in franchise history for a trip of that length.

"Everyone thought we'd go on the road and fail," coach **George** Karl said. "But we got a little confidence going. We were playing well. We did it with different people. A fun month. Legitimate wins."

But more injuries would cripple the team.

Guard Earl Boykins fractured his left hand in mid-March and was lost for the rest of the regular season. Forward Eduardo Najera injured his right knee around the same time and missed five games in March and five more in April because of a fractured right foot. Kenyon Martin and Marcus Camby continued to hobble with injuries.

And yet the Nuggets increased their pace and by season's end had averaged 100.3 points per game, fifth best in the NBA.

"Sometimes I don't know how we were doing it on offense without making jump shots," Karl said. "I didn't know how we were going to score 100 points, but we always seemed to score. Carmelo (Anthony) posted up. We played three guards a lot. But the injuries continued to stop us from building the foundation of who you are, from reaching a stronger level. We weren't building who we were."

The Nuggets clinched their first division title in 18 years when they won at Portland on April 10. But then they lost their final four regular-season games. Karl tried to rest his injured players, and a letdown followed.

"April," he said, "did not have a good feel to it."

A wounded team was bounced from the playoffs in five games by the Los Angeles Clippers. Martin was suspended after a halftime blowup in Game 2. After the Game 4 loss, Patterson yelled at Karl, "I can see why Kenyon went off!" Patterson was benched for the series' final game.

In Game 4, Evans embarrassed himself and the franchise when he grabbed the groin region of Clippers center Chris Kaman. Evans was fined \$10,000 by the league. He played less than five minutes in the playoff finale.

The early playoff exit illustrated the Nuggets' weaknesses, including a lack of cohesiveness in the locker room. With a season-and-a-half under Karl complete, some of his players are grumbling louder about his coaching tactics.

One Nugget said: "**George's** style is a smart-ass fashion. **George** never takes the blame. He can be an egotistical (jerk). Guys by the end of the year had had enough of it. It showed in the playoffs."

To which Karl responded: "I tell them things in a lot of different fashions. Smart-ass is one way. Most things are told first one on one. If they refuse to listen, I go to something else. I go back to our first meeting as a reference. I'll ask them in front of the team.

"Is it my job to push players to be the best or let them be soft? My job is not to be liked. My job is to push them to win. A lot of times players just want it one way. Sorry. I'm going to attack things that affect my basketball team. Sure, I know my ego."

Karl said that in postseason meetings with his players that some asked him to be "harder and tougher" on the team. Karl said he will have "a calm aggressiveness now to managing this team."

One Nuggets player said it's needed. "All of the guys on this team are overly sensitive. And quite a few of them are very immature."

Karl added: "The injuries, the drama of last season? Players are definitely for the team or for what I call the NBA b.s. Those kind of players make life hard."

Nuggets players complained about their roles and their minutes, saying their roles were not defined, leading to confusion. Karl did not buy it during the season and is not now.

"Roles?" he asked. "It's not how I coach. Your role is to play the best basketball you ever played. We're not a ton of stars. We are a ton of good basketball players. Defining roles is a cop-out."

It is clear the Nuggets need changes in personnel, and attitude, to reach a higher level.

Nuggets owner Stan Kroenke believes that will happen.

In his e-mail response for this series, he stated: "In our dealings with other owners and front offices, we are viewed as a team that is on the verge of doing great things. Again, there aren't many teams that have made the playoffs each of the past three seasons. If we can stay a little healthier next season, then special things can happen. As is the case with most teams, we are focused on our own house and winning championships.

"Our goal will remain the same. We are focused on building a team that will compete for a

championship on a consistent basis."

When asked what qualities he will seek in naming a new general manager, Kroenke answered: "We are evaluating management structures that make the most sense here in Denver and we will announce that decision when our analysis is complete."

Several Nuggets officials who talked for this series believe Kroenke's leadership does not provide stability. One Nuggets official was critical of Kroenke's communication style.

"Kroenke should be more open and honest to the media," the official said. "His team was lying to the media about Kenyon, especially about his injuries. Stan is not talking like he should. You get rid of your GM and have no press conference? That doesn't sound right. Somebody is giving Stan bad advice. He has a responsibility to the media and fans to let people know what is going on."

Karl believes the Nuggets can build off three consecutive playoff appearances.

"I think we can come back and do good things next year," he said. "We can come back and knock the socks off the NBA. They're rooting against us. We do not have that many holes. We are still division champions. I think we can be division champions next year. It is about what we do to make the team stronger, not weaker. And we will be stronger from what we went through last year. This is a year we should be grown up. Last year was a forced year to grow up."

He concludes with this jolting thought for all, especially his players:

"People say I am the same **George** Karl. Some of those people have not talked to me in 10 years. I am so different than I was 10 years ago. But I'm about to get back to some of that with this team."