

## Posey has earned his keep Re-signing him should be a priority for Celtics

By Marc J. Spears, Globe Staff | June 15, 2008

**It might be a little much to give Mark Bartelstein a championship ring if the Celtics win the title. But for his role in solidifying their bench, the least the Celtics could do is send the sports agent some championship hats and T-shirts.**

Bartelstein represents three reserves who were instrumental in one of the greatest comebacks in NBA history - when the Celtics overcame a 24-point deficit en route to a 97-91 victory over the Lakers in Game 4 of the Finals last Thursday. James Posey, Eddie House, and P.J. Brown combined for 42 points and 8 rebounds in the victory. In large part because of that spark off the bench, the Celtics are up, 3-1, in the best-of-seven series and one win away from their first title since 1986.

But here's the bad news for Celtics fans: All three will be unrestricted free agents this summer (yes, Posey will opt out of his contract June 30). And if Boston wants them back - Posey in particular - Bartelstein will be a key figure in making it happen.

"Right now, they are just completely focused in on trying to win a championship," said Bartelstein. "Pose has been through it before and knows how hard it is. Eddie, this is his first experience with this kind of going through what he's gone through in the playoffs.

"Players talk about dying for an opportunity and they don't do anything with it when given a chance. But every time he gets a chance, he comes up big. It's difficult to do what Eddie's done throughout.

"P.J. went for a long time not thinking he was going to play. At the end of the day, he saw the opportunity for a championship with a team like the Celtics. He has a great relationship with [assistant coach] Clifford Ray and it gave him a chance to come back with those guys. He's having the time of his life and is glad he went back."

A strong argument could be made that Posey is Boston's fifth-most valuable player after Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, Ray Allen, and Rajon Rondo. The versatile veteran can guard four positions, is one of the team's strongest leaders, and has accepted his reserve role with open arms. He averaged 7.4 points and 4.4 rebounds in 24.6 minutes per game during the regular season and was a Sixth Man of the Year candidate.

Posey signed a two-year deal last offseason paying \$3.2 million this season with a player option for \$3.4 million next season. The option was basically just an insurance policy for the 31-year-old Posey; Bartelstein said Posey will become a free agent.

"That's sort of been the plan all along," Bartelstein said. "The Celtics knew when they signed him for great value. They gave him the option for security reasons. They got him for a below-value deal.

"I saw Doc [Rivers] in a game at the end of the season in Chicago and he absolutely summed up

James by saying in a tunnel to me that, 'He is so much better than advertised. I fought hard to get him, but living every day, you see how much he brings you.' "

Celtics general manager Danny Ainge has declined comment on free agents until season's end. Posey also won't talk about it now.

Posey will be an unrestricted free agent and the most Boston can offer is a mid-level exception deal, which would be expected to start at about \$5.8 million. If the Celtics offer him the full mid-level exception or something close to it over four years, they should have a strong shot at re-signing him. But they shouldn't be surprised if several teams go after him hard, too.

"Everyone in the league will go after him," an NBA executive said. "The Lakers probably will. But it will probably be the same money. He can pick and choose. He's like Robert Horry now. A team close to winning will sign him.

"I know he likes it there. I'd be surprised if he left. Will someone pay him a lot of money during a two-year span with a third-year option? No one will do that. No one has the cap space. Who will give him more of the mid-level? That's what it will come down to."

Brown has been a great veteran leader and big man option off the bench. The 38-year-old has said countless times that he will sit down with his family in Slidell, La., after the season and decide whether he still wants to play. Boston should try to re-sign him.

The journeyman House would probably love to return, but intriguing rookie point guard Gabe Pruitt will likely be given an opportunity to prove himself backing up Rondo. Even so, the Celtics will still need a veteran reserve point guard, and House has a year with the franchise under his belt.

With all due respect to Brown and House, the Celtics' primary offseason objective must be Posey.

"He's worried about one thing - getting a ring," Bartelstein said. "I don't want to turn the attention. He loves playing for Doc and with those guys. Boston has embraced him. Boston fans are knowledgeable and they understand what he does."

**On second thought, maybe the Celtics should size Bartelstein for a championship ring.**