



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Assemblyman Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield)

The most difficult job in the Legislature is that of an Assembly rookie. Mastering Sacramento's learning curve is akin to scaling Mount Everest, where the summit is shrouded in a fog of policy and politics and the climb must begin even before one is sworn into office. It must be made with a minimum of missteps, and there are few veterans to help show the way.

Consider the policy basics that must be conquered: education, transportation, local government finance, workers' compensation, tax policy, water use, agriculture, e-commerce, the state budget, urban sprawl, energy, Indian gaming, insurance regulation, prison reform, parole policy, prevailing wage — to name a few.

And then, there are the political dynamics. Who among colleagues may be trusted and who has a hidden agenda? How does one set up an effective fund-raising operation? How does one deal with lobbyists and special-interest groups? Where does one find and hire competent staff? How does one convert an idea into a bill, then marshal support? What are the keys to securing good committees?

Some arrive better prepared than others, and some sprint quickly to the head of the class. In 1998, for instance, rookie Assemblywoman Carole Migden (D-San Francisco) was named to head the Assembly Appropriations Committee in her first week in office.

But Migden was an exception. Until this session.

As one survey participant noted, "This freshman class is remarkable. ...They're bright, hard-working and show some integrity. In an era of term limits, it's encouraging."

Several among the Assembly's current crop of 31 rookies have gone not only to the head of the class but to the top of the house itself: one as speaker, another as Republican Party leader, a third as Rules Committee chair. A fourth is rumored to be heir to the Budget Committee. As a result, a number of first-termers could have become "Rookie of the Year."

As The Minnies interviews began, it was assumed that designating a top rookie would be a slam dunk. After all, Democrat Fabian Nunez of Los Angeles had been elected speaker in February 2004 — the first freshman to legitimately win that job. (Rookie Republican Brian Sentencich briefly held the speakership in 1995, but his election was a Democratic ploy to deny the post to GOP leadership.)

But as interviews progressed, the choice was no longer

so obvious as participants pointed not to Nunez but to the head of the Republican caucus — Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield. And although they were inclined to split the award between the two caucus leaders, the majority of those interviewed put McCarthy first and Nunez second.

The reasons varied, but the factor most often cited centered on how each came to be leader. McCarthy, most believed, had put the deal together himself and without much help, while Nunez was the favored candidate of then-Speaker Herb Wesson and needed Wesson's considerable assistance to reach his goal.

Most insiders also thought that, to date, McCarthy has been the better leader, noting that he had united and re-invigorated his caucus and had become, in a short time, the quickest study in the Assembly (see *CJ*, November 2003). Nunez, on the other hand, was criticized for several missteps, including

his attempt to send a bill on pensions to the Senate without a floor vote in the Assembly.

"For his raw political instincts, he's a Brulte-caliber Republican. He far overshadows [Republican Senate Leader] Dick Ackerman. People talk about the GOP being irrelevant, but McCarthy had his handprints all over the budget ... he pretty much got what he wanted. Even though he's dwarfed by Schwarzenegger, McCarthy has had an impact."

"He's very smart. He seems to want quick victories on ideological grounds, but he is more willing than some in his caucus to allow the house to work well."

"It is significant that, on some important issues, [Senate President pro Tem John] Burton will cut his deals with McCarthy and ignore the Democratic caucus."

The Freshman Elite:

Rick Keene (R-Chico), John Laird (D-Santa Cruz), Mark Leno (D-San Francisco), Cindy Montanez (D-San Fernando), Fabian Nunez (D-Los Angeles), Todd Spitzer (R-Orange), Lois Wolk (D-Davis)

Previous winners:

1998: Carole Migden (D-San Francisco)
2000: Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento)
2002: Keith Richman (R-Northridge)

