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## CALIFORNICATION

By the time his third season rolled around in Los Angeles, Phil Jackson had become very much a California kind of guy. And that bothered several of the assistants and coworkers who had been with him in Chicago.

“Phil changed once he got to L.A.,” one of them said matter-of-factly, adding that Jackson had become more distant. Getting access to him had become more difficult. Some of his old staff said one big difference was the absence of Jackson’s former wife June, who had always helped to keep him grounded in Chicago.

Not that his longtime associates had anything against Jeanie Buss. To the contrary, just about everyone liked Buss with her smart, upbeat personality.

“She’s quite a gal,” Tex Winter said of her.

Buss leant her own touches to managing Jackson, to the point of watching his diet and making sure that he kept his hair and beard trimmed. Yet she adored and worshiped him, seemingly like the rest of California’s huge population. Such adulation only pumped up his already distended ego, one friend said.

With all the praise and worship he found in L.A. after winning the Lakers’ first two championships, it would be hard for Jackson not to change, a friend and coworker said. Coaches who knew Jackson from his early days in the CBA—when he had to rely on assistant Charley Rosen to install the simplest

flex offense—were amused by the lofty perch he now held in the basketball world.

September 2001 brought the jolt of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Scheduled to play a series of exhibition games in Japan, the Lakers saw those plans altered. They still held their training camp in Honolulu, but the trip overseas was put aside because of travel concerns.

Further clouding the situation, the team was hit by a host of troubles. Derek Fisher again injured his foot and required another surgery and another long recovery, and Shaquille O'Neal injured a toe that required surgery, which meant that he would miss training camp; Jackson himself missed much of training camp because of the death of his ninety-four-year-old mother, and Kobe Bryant retreated to Philadelphia to bury his grandfather.

The combined setbacks would only serve to pull the team closer together, O'Neal told reporters. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, the country had swelled with a sense of unity, and the center acknowledged that it would be hard for basketball players to be divided by pettiness when so many other unfortunate people had to overcome much greater problems. Even so, Jackson reminded his players, the fans, and media that the team would have to prove its chemistry again in 2002 if the Lakers wanted to join the elite number of NBA teams that had won three straight titles.

If anything would prove a problem for the Lakers in 2002, it was the new zone defenses, allowed for the first time in league history. Sitting out with his toe injury, O'Neal watched with anger as teams began experimenting with new defensive schemes, and he threatened to retire. He knew those zones would be used to corral him as soon as he returned.

“When it ain't fun, then I'm going to go do something else,” he said as exhibition season opened.

If O'Neal had retired he would have given up about \$135 million owed him for the remaining five years of his Laker contract. Although O'Neal made a move during the preseason to drop his agent Leonard Armato, who had represented him for nine years, most observers figured that O'Neal would not walk away from such wealth. It was clear, though, that he truly hated zone defenses.

The team faced other changes as well. In the biggest development of all, team captain Ron Harper retired. His presence had gone a long way toward helping Bryant and O'Neal resolve their differences, and his influence would be sorely missed.

The team replaced power forward Horace Grant, who left for Orlando in free agency, with Samaki Walker, a free agent from San Antonio. Also in camp as a free agent was Dickey Simpkins, who once played for Jackson with the Bulls. Tex Winter considered Simpkins a smart player who understood the triangle offense. Later, the coaches would surmise that they might have been able to win a fourth, and even a fifth, championship had they been able to keep Simpkins. But the forward did not have a guaranteed contract, and Jerry Buss wasn't about to cut a player with guaranteed money to keep a second-line forward.

At guard the Lakers brought in Lindsey Hunter from Milwaukee to help with shooting and point guard play while Fisher recovered from his latest surgery.

Another key issue was the development of swing player Devean George. The Laker coaches had long considered him to be absolutely brimming with talent, but George was strangely unsure of how to cash in on his abilities. The same was true for power forward Slava Medvedenko, an intriguing offensive player limited by the language barrier.

The Lakers had shocked their fans in 2001 with round after round of unseemly bickering between O'Neal, Bryant, and Jackson, but O'Neal's prediction that the 2002 troubles would only bring the team closer together proved right. Despite the range of setbacks and the Lakers' struggles through the regular season, they would manage 58 wins and a 15-4 run through the playoffs to their third and most harmonious championship.

They again swept Portland in the first round then met the Spurs in the conference semifinals for the second straight season. The Lakers took a 2-1 edge in the series, but San Antonio seized control in the second half of Game 4 in the Alamodome and had a 10-point lead with just under five minutes left.

Bryant answered by scoring 10 points in the final five minutes, his last two on a rebound and put-back with 5.1 seconds left, to push the Lakers to an 87-85 win and a 3-1 series lead. It was the team's eleventh consecutive road win in the playoffs, dating back to their huge run in 2001.

Bryant's heroics propelled his team into the next round, where they struggled through a classic seven-game showdown with the testy Sacramento Kings. The presence of Jackson and his team in noisy Arco Arena always seemed to incite Sacramento's fans to new levels of excess.

"I describe it like high school basketball," Laker Derek Fisher said of the atmosphere. "Most everybody has played high school ball, and you had that one crosstown rival that when you went there, they were going to be throw-

ing rocks at the bus and spitting on the court and doing everything to try to get you off of your game. Arco is that place. That city, that town, just loves that team, and they come out to support that team like no other place in the league. It really does give them an advantage. A lot of times in sports these days, it really doesn't matter where you play. You know you can win games. But when you go there you know you're gonna have to go to another level to win. I love it."

In Game 4 of the series, the Lakers had to endure the booing of Staples Center regulars after the team fell behind 40-20 at the end of the first quarter. The Kings pushed that to 46-22 before the momentum began to turn. The bad omen for Sacramento came with Samaki Walker's three-point desperation heave that was counted, although it just missed the halftime buzzer. It was the second three-pointer of Walker's career.

The Lakers tightened their defense and clamped down on the boards in the second half, and the Kings began their descent, making for an extremely tight close.

At 1:39 Robert Horry floated in a three-pointer that cut Sacramento's lead to 96-93. Then, surprisingly, O'Neal canned two free throws to cut the lead to one with 26.9 seconds to play. Kings center Vlade Divac answered by making one of two free throws with 11.8 seconds to go. Their lead at two, the Kings stood for one final defensive effort.

Bryant drove the lane but missed, as did O'Neal on an offensive put-back. Divac batted the rebound outside, hoping to knock the ball out of play. Instead, it traveled right to Horry, waiting in three-point land.

"When it came rolling out, it was like, 'Oh, look what I got,'" he said afterward. He floated in the winner as time expired.

The strange turn of events was just the edge the Lakers needed. Instead of being down 3-1, they pulled even at 2-2.

"The Kings are so cocky, they didn't really pay attention," Horry later recalled. "They were like, 'We still got home-court advantage so we can still win this thing.'"

Instead, Sacramento closed out the series with poor rebounding and a collapse at the free throw line that saw them fall at home in the seventh game. Once again, one of Phil Jackson's teams seemed to have the league mesmerized.

The Kings safely in their wake, the Lakers returned to the NBA Finals to face the revamped New Jersey Nets, led by Jason Kidd and coached by former Laker Byron Scott. They had no answer for O'Neal, who won his third straight Finals MVP award as the Lakers gained the first championship

sweep in their history and joined the Minneapolis Lakers, Boston Celtics, and Jackson's Chicago Bulls as the only teams to win three straight titles. It was Jackson's ninth title, leaving him tied with Red Auerbach for the most titles by an NBA head coach. The outcome was also the 156th playoff victory for Jackson, which pushed him past Pat Riley for the most coaching postseason victories. Although Jackson was registering his third three-peat, the Lakers finally had one of their own to celebrate.

Still, Magic Johnson told the Associated Press that Jackson's club wasn't as good as his Showtime teams or Michael Jordan's Chicago Bulls—or Larry Bird's Boston Celtics, for that matter. Johnson explained that the other teams featured stronger, deeper rosters, while Jackson's Lakers consisted of two stars and a host of role players.

Facing more Hack-A-Shaq, O'Neal had set a four-game Finals record for points scored (145), and free throws made (45) and attempted (68).

"I'd like to congratulate Phil Jackson for bringing out the best in us," the center said. "He gave us a plan when we first met him. He gave me a plan when we first met him. He promised us if we stuck to the plan that everything would work out. I'm just glad that Jerry West was able to get him to sign up, because it was something I needed in my life. I was sort of a great player that didn't have any championships. Ever since I met Phil, now I have three."

Three, of course, would prove to be the limit. Jackson and his assistant coaches had come to that conclusion during their years in Chicago. It seemed the most they could squeeze out of any situation was three straight titles. Success had its boundaries, and that certainly seemed to be the maximum that could be humanly expected in the modern championship equation. The Lakers found themselves making strange, frustrating attempts to push that envelope over the next two campaigns. In the process, they would find out more about themselves than perhaps they wanted to know.

There were many challenges for Jackson and his Lakers throughout their seasons together, and just about all of them were related to this fact: Jackson, a man known for establishing strong relationships with his players, would fail miserably at building a relationship with Bryant.

After the team chemistry had finally disintegrated, one of Jackson's close associates would offer that the mishandling of Bryant as a player was a primary factor in the eventual unraveling of the team. Certain things happened early in Jackson and Bryant's relationship that eroded Bryant's ability to trust his coach.

“Phil was trying to figure me out a little bit,” Bryant said. “One of the things I told him is, ‘There’s nothing to figure out. I’m just trying to play the game and learn the game the best I can.’ Once we got that established we started moving a little bit. But I didn’t get into his mind games. I had so many other things to think about with this game. I didn’t really have the time even to do that. I did notice Phil when he was trying to play mind games. It was funny. I found it funny.”

Funny, as in strange.

Bryant did not find it amusing when Jackson pushed West away from the franchise. When the team won the 2001 title, Bryant appeared at the championship parade in West’s number 44 throwback jersey, a statement of defiance that revealed how much he missed his mentor.

Bryant’s conflict with Jackson flared throughout their first five seasons together.

“Very early in our time in Los Angeles, Phil made the decision to go with Shaq,” Tex Winter said, “and he made it clear to Kobe and the press and everyone else that it was Shaq’s team. He made it clear he was far more interested in accommodating Shaq than he was Kobe. Kobe seemed to accept this.”

Yet in the process, Jackson and Bryant’s relationship suffered extensive damage. Accommodating O’Neal seemed to necessitate that Jackson take an aggressive posture with Bryant, to the point that Winter expressed concern that the head coach making Bryant “a whipping boy” might hurt the young guard’s development.

“I was very much on Kobe, riding him and working with him very hard earlier in his career, and had to back off, basically, to a point where he felt better about our relationship—where I wasn’t as restrictive with him,” Jackson admitted to the *L.A. Times*. “He felt I was always on him, always on him. He did too much, he tried to do too many things. The more I let him have [some freedom], the better he got as a basketball player. The more I restricted or got restrictive with him, the more adamantly he would go about doing the things I didn’t want him to do.”

Still, Jackson persisted in taking the harsh path with Bryant, who worked incessantly at improving his game. At the same time, the coach took a hands-off approach with the immensely gifted O’Neal, who did not favor working hard. The discrepancy sometimes ate at Bryant, as did Jackson’s penchant for attacking him in the press.

One of the worst examples of this came early in the 2002–3 campaign,

when Charley Rosen, Jackson's former assistant coach and coauthor of two Jackson books, wrote a blistering story for ESPN.com accusing Bryant of selfishness. Rosen witnessed a heated exchange between Winter and Bryant on the bench. Then the writer quoted portions of private conversations with Winter that left the assistant coach taken aback. It seemed obvious to observers that the story was yet another effort by Jackson to shape Bryant's public image and, worse yet, to damage the relationship between Winter and Bryant.

The older coach and the firebrand young star, however, had a strong sense of their relationship. They weren't above barking at each other, but they remained strong allies.

"Phil was dealing with two mighty big egos," Winter said. "But in my mind I blamed Shaq more than Kobe. Kobe tried to sacrifice. Kobe tried to please Shaq, because Kobe realized the team's effectiveness began with Shaq. But if you look at Shaq's quotes in the paper, it was always me, me, me. Give me the ball. It's my team, my city. Shaq is a wonderful person in a lot of ways. He's very compassionate, very generous. He has a great sense of humor. But he's moody; he's unpredictable. And he's very self-centered."

The players' large personalities always lay just underneath the surface of the Lakers' chemistry. After three championships, the personality conflicts took a break in 2003. Yet the team struggled throughout its most harmonious season, plagued by injuries to O'Neal and caught in a battle to make the playoffs.

Such a situation meant that there were few highlights, except perhaps for the amazing streak of nine straight games in which Bryant scored better than 40 points. It began in Phoenix on January 29, when Bryant rang up 40 points on the Suns. From there, the Lakers won 12 of 14 games, including five in a row. In previous seasons such an outburst might have ruptured the peace, but it survived tenuously over the early weeks of 2003. Then again, Jackson had ordered his guard to be more aggressive. The streak allowed Bryant to tie Jordan's own streak, but it fell short of the fourteen straight games racked up by Wilt Chamberlain. Bryant also scored 35 or better in thirteen straight games, still short of the prodigious Chamberlain.

"The streak is a streak," Bryant said afterward. "It's not going to win us any championships."

Indeed, nothing would that spring.

Jackson missed the first game of his coaching career that spring with a kidney stone. His team showed similar signs of wear, managing to win just

50 games in the regular season. In the playoffs, Robert Horry's magnificent threes stopped falling. And in the conference semifinals against San Antonio, the rest of the operation came apart. In the middle of the series, Jackson missed another weekend as doctors discovered his immediate need for an angioplasty procedure, which explained his months of mysterious fatigue.

Despite his return to the bench later in the series, the Spurs eliminated the Lakers in six games, closing out the deal at the Staples Center. The loss terminated Jackson's record run of winning 25 consecutive playoff series, and it meant that he would not get past Red Auerbach for NBA titles won as a coach. The Lakers themselves had won 13 straight series, from the first round against Sacramento in 2000 to the first round against Minnesota in 2003.

"We are severely disappointed we couldn't make a run for the championship and get our opportunity to win a fourth," Jackson told reporters. "It tells us something about how difficult it is and how much dedication and discipline you have to have to win four years in a row. We had a great run. We've gotten a little bit older, we suffered some injuries, we had a difficult year, as I told them in the locker room about forty minutes ago. We talked sincerely about making correct steps from the beginning of the season to the end, which places us in a position to win. This year, we couldn't do that, we couldn't make the correct steps. We stumbled, we fell, we lacked some discipline as a basketball club, and we paid the price for it."

The loss left Bryant, Fisher, the Laker girls, and numerous fans in tears. "It's a foreign feeling," Bryant, who had averaged 32.1 points during the playoffs, told reporters. "I don't like the feeling. I don't think anybody else likes the feeling; I don't ever want to feel it again."

The team hardly had time to digest the loss before events took a strange turn.

At the end of June, Bryant flew on a private jet to Colorado, where he was scheduled to undergo knee surgery. That night, as he rested in a Colorado resort hotel, the Laker guard had sexual relations with a nineteen-year-old resort employee. Their differing accounts of the evening would explode into a nightmare for all involved. She said Bryant raped her; he later told police the sex was consensual.

The incident seemed in such contrast to Bryant's image that reporters, fans, teammates, and team employees expressed shock at the news that the twenty-five-year-old guard would be charged. Soon the shock would give way to the reality of tabloid headlines, twenty-four-hour cable news coverage, and a story that threatened to swamp the team.

The incident erupted at the same time as the Lakers announced the signings of future Hall of Famers Karl Malone and Gary Payton, both of whom took millions of dollars in pay cuts to join the team as free agents. Poised to harvest the media attention and speculation over just how great the club could be, the team's management instead found itself dealing with questions and issues of a more serious nature. The accuser believed she had been assaulted, and Bryant faced charges that under Colorado law could have landed him in prison for decades.

On July 18 the district attorney in Eagle County, Colorado, filed a charge of felony sexual assault against Bryant. From that beginning would come a steady run of Bryant court appearances in Colorado, with hundreds of media representatives descending on the community of Eagle. With the reporters came a throng of spectators, many of them wearing Laker jerseys, sporting signs, and cheering for Bryant, who posted a \$25,000 bond in regard to *The People of The State of Colorado v. Kobe Bean Bryant*, case number 03CR204.

The guard's life became a battle fought on four fronts. He was managing a tense relationship at home, plus the demands of his legal defense. Beyond that, his relationship with his coaches and his teammates grew yet more strained, and he found himself scrambling to stop the disintegration of a carefully built portfolio of endorsement income. His lineup of contracts with Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Nike was the envy of the NBA, yet he would watch each of those relationships wither over the coming months, a development that cost him millions of dollars.

Apart from the fantastic turn of events, the Lakers still suffered from strained relationships. It was true that O'Neal and Bryant had found a level of cooperation over the 2001–2 and 2002–3 campaigns. But the relationship between Bryant and Jackson still suffered, so much so that some of Jackson's assistants had urged him at the end of the 2002–3 season to “make peace with Kobe.”

Jackson, however, declined that route and opted to take an even more aggressive strategy in dealing with the young guard. With the coach's relationship with Bryant obviously deteriorating by the day, it would not take long for O'Neal to pick up on those vibes. Not surprisingly, the tentative truce between the team's two stars quickly disappeared, and another pissing match seemed ready to break out.

Bryant had reached the point in his contract where he could opt out and entertain offers from other teams. The Lakers' protection in this situation was that the team could ultimately offer more money than other teams to

induce him to re-sign. Opting out was a relatively routine process for NBA players, and in limited interviews on the subject Bryant had indicated that he would indeed test the marketplace, if for no other reason than that it offered him the opportunity to secure a raise from the Lakers.

Jackson, though, apparently sensed a growing conflict in which Bryant would have more power than ever in dealing with his coach. Jackson himself was heading into the last year of his five-year deal with the team that paid him roughly \$6 million per season.

The coach decided to move forward with an aggressive public relations strategy, a tactic that he had employed with great success against Bulls GM Jerry Krause in Chicago. Jackson called this tactic “seeding” ideas with the media. The coach, after all, had long ago learned that reporters were hungry for his inside tips about team issues. As training camp and the season neared in the fall of 2003, his comments were aimed at suggesting that Bryant was being disloyal by planning to opt out of his contract during the summer of 2004. Raising the issue was the coach’s way of setting the media agenda, and it suddenly meant that Bryant had yet another issue to address in his busy young life. At the same time Jackson was expressing support publicly for the young guard, the coach was making his first moves in a months-long public relations battle.

O’Neal was hoping for a contract extension as well. While he had nearly three years remaining at a whopping \$30 million, he was hoping the team would extend the deal with a pay raise. The Lakers, however, hoped O’Neal would take less money in consideration of his age, his poor conditioning, and the number of injuries that had led him to miss games in recent seasons. O’Neal was not happy about the issue and openly pouted. At one point during a preseason game, he yelled at Jerry Buss, “Pay me!” It was not a mature or a smart move, and the owner wouldn’t forget it easily.

Meanwhile, Bryant had spent the weeks leading up to training camp entertaining thoughts of not playing in the upcoming season while he battled the criminal charges against him. Unable to make a decision on the matter, the guard missed the start of the team’s training camp in Hawaii, where a host of camera crews and reporters waited to take in the spectacle of an accused rapist attempting to play basketball.

With Bryant’s absence, reporters asked O’Neal what it felt like to not have the whole team in camp.

“I can’t answer that,” O’Neal replied, “because the full team is here.”

Jackson had long used Bryant’s “outsider” status as a means of motivat-

ing and controlling the Laker roster, much as he had rallied his Chicago Bulls against the “outsider” Krause. But the comment from the team leader set the conflict at a new level. Using Jackson’s principle of boundary setting, O’Neal had, in effect, declared that Bryant was not part of the team.

The guard showed up in Hawaii the next day, and Winter noticed that his teammates seemed eager to pull him into the group and reassure him. But O’Neal’s comment had lit the old fires that burned between the two players.

Bryant shook off the comment and told reporters he’d rather be back in Los Angeles with his family. “You can’t imagine what it’s like going through what I’ve gone through, what I’m still going through,” he said. “But I come out here to play, this is my job. I’m going to come out here, I’m going to do it well.”

The charges had “terrified” him, Bryant admitted. “Not so much for myself, but just for what my family’s been going through. They’ve got nothing to do with this. Just because their names have been dragged through the mud, I’m scared for them. I feel like I can deal with this. I have to deal with this. But my family, they’re not to blame.”

## Distractions

The addition of Karl Malone and Gary Payton created an instant euphoria among Laker fans. Recruited by O’Neal, the two had turned down substantial offers from other teams to sign with Los Angeles because it seemed an excellent opportunity to win a championship. The team had been repeatedly victimized by the screen and roll against San Antonio during the 2003 playoffs, and it was projected that Payton, an excellent defender, would help fix the team’s defensive woes. For his part, Malone was just the power forward the team needed at both ends of the floor. Nearing forty years old, Malone remained the best-conditioned athlete in the league.

Neither man, however, had any experience with Winter’s complex triangle offense. As a rule of thumb, it took a player two years of work to become comfortable with the on-court reads and decisions that the offense required.

Payton and Malone were both known for their great skill in the running game, and both said they planned to run as much as possible to avoid the need for setting up in the offense. For years the Lakers had been slowed by O’Neal’s disdain for the running game. Now, though, Malone warned his friend the center that he “better be ready to get out and run.”