



BACK FOR MORE

IN THE CITY THAT MADE REPEATING FAMOUS, IT'S NOT HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHAT'S ON THE MIND OF THIS YEAR'S LAKERS. BY GRAHAM FLASHNER

When Phil Jackson said he had “no concerns” about the Lakers before the start of the season, he wasn’t being arrogant. On paper, the Lakers remain the deepest, most talented team in the Western Conference and look to have an excellent shot at repeating as NBA Champions—something that hasn’t been done since the Kobe/Shaq squad managed a three-peat in ’02.

They messed with their chemistry when they traded Trevor Ariza for Ron Artest, but they’re so loaded that even Artest’s distractions shouldn’t stop them. Making sure the Lakers are hungry enough to fight off teams that haven’t yet won (Cavaliers, Magic) or are looking to reclaim the throne (Celtics, Spurs) gives Jackson his greatest coaching challenge since Dennis Rodman.

Any talk of a repeat begins and ends with Kobe Bryant, still the coldest player in the game. You might

start a franchise with LeBron, but if you want to be playing in June, roll with Mamba. At 31, he’s still in the prime of his career, even with the pounding of a dozen postseasons and a recent Olympics having exacted a toll. What’s more, Kobe took post-up lessons this summer from Hakeem Olajuwon, which is akin to Sandy Koufax teaching Mariano Rivera how to throw a better curveball.

As important as Kobe is, Pau Gasol is the guy who helped the Lakers get over the hump. There might be more talented big men in the NBA, but with Kobe to screen-and-roll off, Gasol’s game elevates to Tim Duncan levels. Gasol’s lingering hamstring injury is worrisome, however. If Pau doesn’t stay healthy, the Lakers don’t repeat. It’s that simple.

Another key to back-to-back titles is Lamar Odom, whom the Lakers wisely re-signed. Odom, a man capable of

a triple-double every night, a starter on virtually every other NBA team, is L.A.’s main weapon off the bench. The Lakers feed off his emotional intensity, and his size and versatility make him a match-up nightmare.

Last season’s run to the title was remarkably drama-free, and that’s just not as much fun in La-La Land. Acquiring the unpredictable Artest satisfies Hollywood’s need for a good villain, and Artest has already assured fans that if the Lakers don’t win, they can blame him. Make no mistake, though, Artest wants a title, and with the help of his new BFF, Kobe, he just might get one. Ron Ron will have his head-scratching moments, but his lockdown D takes the pressure off Kobe to chase the opposition’s best player. Plus Artest is willing to mix it up, a good addition on a finesse team.

Add Derek Fisher’s leadership abilities, Andrew Bynum’s newfound

aggressiveness under the hoop and a deep bench led by speedster Shannon Brown, old pro Luke Walton and fourth-year guard Jordan Farmar, playing with a chip on his shoulder after the Lakers didn’t offer him a contract extension, and you’ve got a team whose biggest obstacle should be their own complacency.

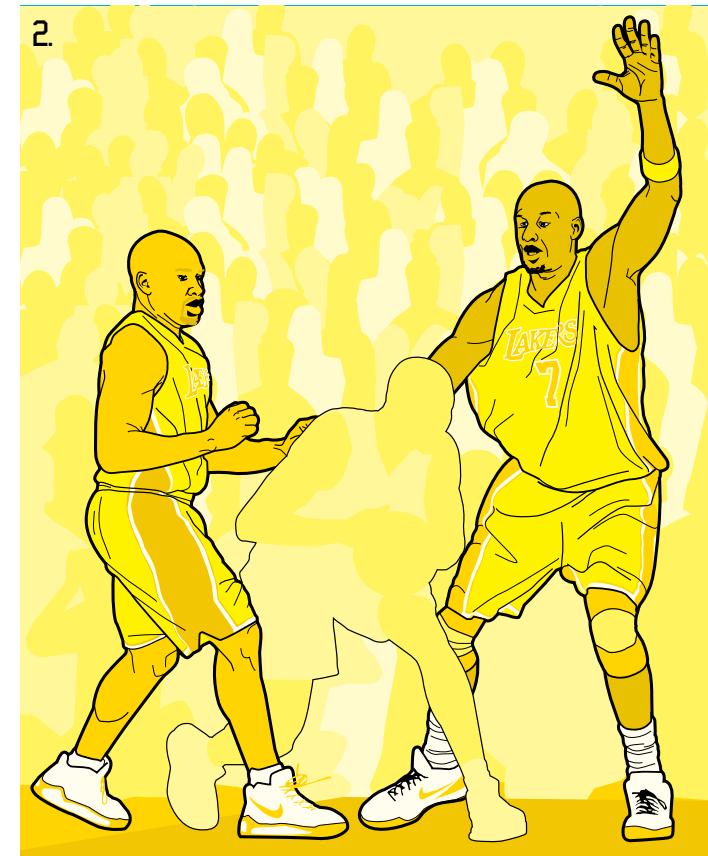
That’s where Jackson comes in. You don’t win 10 rings by just handing your superstars the ball. The Zen King is still a master at pacing his team over the long season, at finding stimulating ways to keep players focused and at getting outsized egos to sublimate their own needs for a greater good.

And if he’s looking for extra motivation, try this: The Lakers still have unfinished business with the Celtics after their beatdown in Boston during the ’08 Finals. Should there be a rematch come June, this time, the Lakers will be ready. 🏀

DARREN MCCOLLESTER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

HOW TO WIN A TITLE BY THE L.A. LAKERS

1. You need to play as a team. In our system, everyone can make decisions with the ball, but if we get too competitive, we can sometimes lose sight of the basics. I’ve figured out when to get guys involved and when to take over. These last two years, having better teammates makes that balance easier—they make me look better than I actually am.—**KOBE BRYANT**
2. Team defense is very important. There’s a difference between playing confident and playing cocky. You can’t always play for the blocked shot. You make them try to beat you from the perimeter.—**LAMAR ODOM**
3. Staying healthy is a blessing if you can do it, but it’s one of those things you can’t control. With conditioning, you do what works best for you. I do a lot of yoga to stay flexible, and I’ve been running more sprints. I rarely touch weights. I’ve had two injuries and neither one was my fault.—**ANDREW BYNUM**
4. You need motivated leadership. We have guys like Kobe and Fisher who keep pushing the envelope with the other guys. Our biggest challenge with players is how they handle adversity. That’s when we work really hard on keeping guys as sharp as possible, so that adversity, when it comes, becomes motivation.—**PHIL JACKSON**



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