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HELENE ELLIOTT

Lakers' Lamar Odom is a role model

He has expanded his capacity on the court and elevated his game this season with a well-rounded performance that has not gone unnoticed by his Lakers teammates

Helene Elliott

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On any other day, Lamar Odom would have gotten plenty of face time on highlight shows with his 17-point, 14-rebound, six-assist performance against Denver in the Lakers' playoff opener.

But Pau Gasol scored 36 points in winning his first postseason game and Kobe Bryant rode a late surge to finish with 32, unfairly reducing Odom's outstanding effort Sunday to a footnote, if it was mentioned at all.

That doesn't mean Odom's teammates failed to notice what he did or the contributions he made during the Lakers' successful push for the top seeding in the West.

The 6-foot-10 forward averaged a double-double in points (14.2) and rebounds (10.6, seventh in the NBA) for the first time since 2004-05, his first Lakers season. He adjusted easily to the arrival of the multi-talented Gasol, raising his emotional energy as much as his play.

He also got stronger as the season progressed, shouldering a heavy load when center Andrew Bynum was injured and again when Gasol's sprained ankle jeopardized the Lakers' quest for home-court advantage.

"I see he's motivated. He's definitely motivated," Gasol said. "He goes into games with a great attitude and great activity. I think he's very active with the ball, without the ball, on the boards, defending. I think he's stepping up and he's taking a big role defensively."

Free of shoulder problems that required surgery last spring and kept him out of the first four games this season -- and relieved of the burden of being the second offensive option -- Odom has showcased his passing skills while increasing his rebounding and scoring.

He averaged 13.2 points in 41 games before the Lakers stole Gasol from Memphis and 15.3 in 36 games afterward. Odom's rebounding (9.4 Before Gasol and 12 After Gasol) and assists (3.1 BG vs. 4.05 AG) also improved.

With an average of 9.8 shots per game AG and 10.8 BG, Odom is shooting less but enjoying life more.

"I'll go with the flow. I'm a team player," Odom said Tuesday after the Lakers prepared for Game 2, tonight at Staples Center.

"I kept trying to make plays and facilitate and do what I normally do. Pau's a great player. He's going to make all of us better."

Odom insisted his role wasn't altered by Gasol's arrival and that if his game improved, it's a tribute to the 7-foot Spaniard.

"When you have a guy of his capability, an All-Star-caliber player, the whole team got better," Odom said, ticking his name as well as Luke Walton and Jordan Farmar.

"He's a great player. You add him to this mix along with Kobe, with his IQ and patience and poise and determination, and his energy is great."

Odom is taking this passing thing a little too seriously.

Sometimes exasperating, sometimes less aggressive than Coach Phil Jackson would want in asserting himself into the offense, Odom deserves credit for channeling his strengths so effectively at both ends of the court.

"Lamar has certainly proved his value to this team in many ways. I just think that it's given him much more of a comfort zone," Jackson said.

"Lamar's an exceptional passer. A lot of his passes come in critical, close quarters, lane-area-type, drop-off-type situations, and with Pau's capabilities, it's just improved his assist ratios and his ability to make plays."

Odom took 14 shots in the Lakers' 128-114 victory over the Nuggets on Sunday, a little outside what Jackson sees as his favored range of eight to 12.

"I don't think he feels he needs to shoot the ball, and when he does take it he stays within the context of what he likes to do," Jackson said. "Most of it is going toward the basket."

For now, that's fine with the Lakers' coach.

"At some point or other, teams are going to make him shoot the basketball and he's going to take some shots," Jackson said. "But up to now he's been able to do what he does well, which is penetrate, dish and get to the basket."

Odom said he expects the Nuggets to double-team Bryant and Gasol more often tonight, "so the game should open up for the rest of us." That should give him more looks closer to the rim.

"And I expect them to come out really hard and focused," he said. "We should look forward to a hard-fought game."

After the disappointment of two consecutive first-round playoff losses to the Phoenix Suns and the anxiety of being mentioned in a rumored trade for Kevin Garnett last summer, Odom is ready for a good battle. He senses that his teammates are too.

"We were confident in our ability right from the beginning. Right from the door," he said.

"We've been through a playoff war with Phoenix and got our butts kicked the second time. This is a mature team. We have the talent to compete with anybody."

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