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Odom's Wait Began Long Before Playoffs Did

By [KAREN CROUSE](#)

Forward [Lamar Odom](#) could not hide his hunger after the [Los Angeles Lakers](#) closed out the [Utah Jazz](#) in Game 6 of the Western Conference semifinals. Scooping popcorn out of a bucket the size of a bowler hat, he consumed a couple of mouthfuls and spit out a kernel of truth. "From now on," he said, "every game is the biggest game of my life."

Odom was a sophomore in high school the last time he waded this deep into the postseason, leading Christ the King in Queens to the Catholic High School Athletic Association Class A championship in 1995.

Then, Odom was considered by some scouts to be the best homegrown talent since Lew Alcindor. Now, he is striving to avoid becoming another [Chris Webber](#), an All-Star who retired this year without ever playing in the [N.B.A.](#) finals.

"When I was about 6 or 7 years old, I always thought it would be my destiny to win an N.B.A. championship or at least to play for one," Odom said. Flashing a smile that could melt wax, he added, "I continue to dream about that."

Playing in the shadow of the league's most valuable player, [Kobe Bryant](#), and in the frontcourt with Pau Gasol, Odom has made "a big statement" this year, according to Lakers Coach [Phil Jackson](#). "He has improved significantly," Jackson said.

In six games against the Jazz, Odom averaged 18.2 points, 11.7 rebounds (9.7 on the defensive end) and 2 blocked shots. On some days, he was also the trailer on the fast break that his teammates ran to skirt the news media.

Odom, 28, does not mind stopping to talk. He is an open book, one that is half cautionary tale, half inspirational tome. His accessibility is remarkable given that his life has been a gold digger's quarry since he was 14.

Before O. J. Mayo, the draft-bound U.S.C. freshman who reportedly received cash and gifts from a runner for an agent, Odom was held up as a symbol of the hardwood decay in college.

Odom, who lost his father to divorce at age 6 and his mother to cancer at 12, attended three high schools his senior year and signed with Nevada-Las Vegas amid rumors that he received improper inducements of cash and free dental work from a university booster. He left before attending a class when his standardized test scores came under scrutiny.

Turning down offers of \$1 million to play in Europe, \$500,000 and the use of a Mercedes to play in Greece and \$100,000 to play in the Continental Basketball Association, Odom enrolled at Rhode Island. He played

there one season before entering the 1999 draft.

In 1998, when Odom was roughly the same age Mayo is now, he told *The Providence Journal*: “You become a commodity and I went along with that. Funny thing, it caused trouble among the grown-ups more than anyone else.”

Ten years later, only the names seem to have changed. “As a player that’s been in O. J. Mayo’s position before, I can kind of sense what’s going on,” Odom said last week. “Everybody wants a piece of you, and it’s too bad because you’re just a kid.”

Drafted fourth over all by the [Los Angeles Clippers](#), Odom was suspended twice in his first four seasons for violation of the league’s drug policy. He signed with the [Miami Heat](#) as a free agent in 2003 and was traded to the Lakers in July 2004 as part of the six-player deal that sent center [Shaquille O’Neal](#) to Miami.

The post-O’Neal era in Los Angeles opened with a revolving door of players, including Odom, patrolling the low post. It was stressful for Odom, playing out of position. One lost battle underneath the basket could demoralize him for an entire game.

“I think Lamar at times felt like he had to take a direct leadership role and maybe get into offensive things that weren’t his strength,” Jackson said. “This year he has been able to stay focused on what he does do well and not get involved in too many of the things that were too difficult.”

On Feb. 1 in Toronto, where the Lakers had a game later that night, Odom was awakened in his hotel room by a call from his manager. “The Lakers just made a big trade for Pau Gasol,” he said, “and it has nothing to do with you.”

Odom, whose name always seems to be swirling in trade winds, felt instantly rejuvenated. “I couldn’t believe it,” he said. In the 39 regular-season games Odom played before Gasol joined the team, he averaged 13.2 points and 9.5 rebounds. In 38 games after Gasol’s arrival, his averages jumped to 15.2 and 11.8.

After the Lakers’ four-game sweep of the [Denver Nuggets](#) in the first round, one of Jackson’s assistants, Frank Hamblen, took Odom aside and told him to get ready for his close-up. “This is where you define yourself as a winner,” Hamblen said.

Odom translated Hamblen’s words to action by driving to the basket, swooping in for rebounds and redirecting Jazz shots. He played with a renewed sense of purpose, the acute sense of loss he usually feels this time of year giving way to a sweet sense of renewal.

June gloom is more than a Southern California meteorological phenomenon for Odom. It is when he observes the 2003 death of his grandmother Mildred Mercer, who helped raise him after his mother died, and the passing three years later of his 6 ½-month-old son, Jayden, who died of sudden infant death syndrome in New York while Odom was home to attend the funeral of an aunt.

“Any chance to play basketball will definitely help me ease some of the pain this time of the year,” Odom said.

After all the setbacks and so much sorrow, Odom is starved for success. There are voids in his life that only

basketball can fill.

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