

Odom finds comfort zone with Lakers

By [Adrian Wojnarowski](#), Yahoo! Sports

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LOS ANGELES – Once, [Lamar Odom](#) was the lost basketball soul on whom the public passed such harsh judgments. He was the high school star bouncing from high school to high school, the teen prodigy ensnared in the grips of a system that made him a pawn of handlers and opportunists.

Nevertheless, Odom is thoughtful and aware, and it shouldn't be surprising that in the middle of the best basketball of his life, a [Los Angeles Lakers](#) championship chase, he found a moment to cast a weary eye toward the saga of a kindred spirit.

“As a player that's been in O.J. Mayo's position before, I can kind of sense what's going on,” Odom said recently. “Everybody wants a piece of you, and it's too bad because you're just a kid.”

A decade ago, Odom was Mayo. The best high school player in the nation with a dubious recruitment to college basketball, agent strife and a fatherless childhood that made him susceptible to grown men with unsavory motives. Even Friday night, shirtless in the Lakers locker room, the tattoo on his back speaks to the state of mind of a son who lost his mother before his 13th birthday. “In God's Hands,” it says above her picture. And below it, “Watching My Back.”

Yes, this is a survivor's story, what with the way he has translated an amazing capacity to adapt to circumstances, to change, in his life and his basketball career. In his career, he has gone through so many incarnations as a player. Odom forever has been a reluctant star, rebelling against the expectations that someone with his athletic gifts and intellect at 6 foot, 10 inches should dominate games as a front man.

For years, he had to fight the idea that he was a disappointment, an underachiever, and now the world sees Odom on his terms, at his genius best, in these Western Conference finals.

In this 101-71 Game 2 victory over the [San Antonio Spurs](#), Odom had a fabulous 20 points, 12 rebounds and four blocks at Staples Center. Before this season, Odom never was comfortable as [Kobe Bryant](#)'s wingman, but the arrival of [Pau Gasol](#) made him an eager third wheel in this diverse Lakers system.

These Lakers are on the way to the NBA finals, a 2-0 series lead on the Spurs that seems insurmountable unless the Spurs' [Manu Ginobili](#) can resurrect a beaten, battered body. For now, the Lakers' threesome of Bryant, Gasol and Odom are playing peerlessly in these playoffs. Odom never treated Gasol's arrival as a demotion, but as a liberation. Odom's scoring, his rebounding, rose with Gasol's trade to the Lakers.

“Pau was a little frustrated he missed shots he usually makes, but he made so many plays for me out there, just rolling to the basket, the attention goes to him,” Odom said. And Odom loves that – the attention, the burden, goes elsewhere, allowing him to

work the edges, the angles. When the Spurs shifted to Gasol, “I get a dunk or I’m right at the rim to get fouled,” Odom said.

Odom’s game, his life, is a model of maturation. Along the way, he pushed past the scars of a sad journey, losing his mother at 12, and a year ago, his baby boy at six months. Personal tragedy taught him the fragility of it all, inspiring a transformation in his ferocity, his diligence. There is something innate within Odom, a hardness, that Mayo will need once he no longer is pawn but instead is performer.

Eight years ago, as the Clippers’ No. 1 pick, Odom was introduced to Los Angeles as a savior but dishonored the franchise’s faith with too much weed and too little leadership. There wasn’t much self-esteem there, wasn’t much belief, and it long seemed Odom was determined to self-destruct.

His young life threatened to be one more New York City cautionary tale. When Odom was on his way to UNLV some 12 years ago, I remember sitting in Jerry Tarkanian’s office at Fresno State, listening to the coach impart wisdom in a phone conversation to the befuddled teenager.

“Why would you go to Vegas?” Tark blurted to him. He knew Odom wasn’t coming to Fresno anymore, so Tarkanian was working hard to keep him out of his conference rival. “What are they going to do for you there but get you (girls)? Go to UConn, go to Kentucky. They’ll get you ready for the NBA.”

Something tells me that Odom’s season at the University of Rhode Island with that great molder of men and educator, Jim Harrick, did less for his personal and professional growth than a leap directly to the NBA would have. There’s no benefit to college life when the system doesn’t dictate you become a college student, when the pompous colleges welcome those mercenary contributions.

The public labels become a self-fulfilling prophecy for these raw recruits. Somehow, the possibility that Mayo was the beneficiary of an agent and middleman’s cash – merely \$30,000 of the alleged \$200,000 Bill Duffy Associates provided to agency runner Rodney Guillory – turns into a mark on Mayo’s soul. Minnesota Timberwolves president Kevin McHale had a good laugh over this mistaken public premise, insisting that it would be “slim pickings” on NBA draft night should every player who has pocketed payments college be passed over.

Odom is still 28 years old, but he has recreated himself over and over as person and player. Sometimes, they seem so intertwined with him. Life hit him hard, hit him young, and yet he always found a way to regenerate his reputation, his resolve, his gifted game.

“The key to my game is versatility,” he said. “And versatile players tend to change their games as their team goes along.”

All those Mayo stories in the news made Lamar Odom think about his own story, his own perilous path to this championship chase. No, he doesn’t need the intimate details of Mayo’s story to empathize with the turmoil, with the chorus of tsk-tsk-tsks crashing down on the kid. Once, they wagged at Odom. He survived.