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From the Los Angeles Times

BILL PLASCHKE

Lamar Odom has taken his lumps, but now carries Lakers on bad back

Outfitted with a girdle to help protect his injury, he twists and turns and guts it out in Game 4 victory over Denver, inspiring his teammates.

Bill Plaschke

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The lump at the base of his spine was so large, it protruded through his white towel as he staggered around the locker room.

"Yeah, it's big," said Lamar Odom. "Yeah, it hurts."

The protective girdle he wore under shorts was so complex, it protruded from his waist as he sprinted around the court.

"Sometimes I felt like I could barely breath," he said. "Sometimes I felt I couldn't leave the ground."

The weight carried by the Lakers against the Denver Nuggets on Wednesday night was so sizable, they bent, buckled and nearly broke.

Then the guy with the bad back took it for them.

The guy who supposedly doesn't care carried them.

The guy who some believe is just renting the uniform owned it -- the moment, the night, and the town, roaring as Lamar Odom roared during a 103-94 Lakers victory.

"Just gutting it out," he said.

Just throwing it down, he did, the basketball and the gantlet, with a late push that led to 19 points, 14 rebounds and a 3-2 lead in the Western Conference finals.

"I just tried to pick up my effort, energy, and I guess sometimes when you do that, sometimes it spreads," he said.

Yeah, it spreads, sometimes even from here to Orlando or Cleveland.

The Lakers are now one win from their second consecutive conference championship, and five wins from Odom's first NBA championship, and don't you think he knows it?

Walking slowly and painfully through the Staples Center tunnel to his car late Wednesday, he stopped suddenly when I asked whether he was close enough to feel it.

"I'm 29, I've been playing 10 years, I've been through so much," he said quietly. "I don't know if I'll ever get this close again."

Anybody still wondering how bad he wants this?

Anybody still wondering how much he needs this?

"All I know is that he's got a bump on the back that's not supposed to be there, and that can't be good," said teammate Luke Walton. "Tonight he really muscled through it."

The bump showed up after Odom badly twisted his back in the previous series against Houston. It is a painful collection of blood that Lakers trainer Gary Vitti has furiously attempted to reduce.

When it didn't disappear quick enough, Vitti concocted an elaborate brace to support the back and protect the bump. Odom now plays with what feels like a constricting, cumbersome fanny pack.

Oh, and he also has played with the burden of being a fall guy with a 7.5 scoring average in a series in which the Lakers have been hammered inside.

Plus, of course, there is the matter of this summer's free agency, Odom subtly sparring with fellow free agent Trevor Ariza to be the one guy to get Jerry Buss' big money.

A lot on him.

But, now, when it counts the most, a lot out of him.

"You know, I won't make no excuse about playing well or not playing well," Odom said. "If my back is hurt or isn't hurt, I'm just going to go out there and give it 100%."

His push began to show with 7:22 left in the third quarter, when, with the Lakers trailing by seven, Odom replaced Andrew Bynum.

Bynum never again moved. And Odom never again stopped, the Lakers outscoring the Nuggets 39-23 for the rest of the game, which was no coincidence.

"His effort brought him there," said a weary Kobe Bryant, who was loving that his team was good enough to win a game in which he made only six baskets.

Odom shot. With 3:26 left in the third quarter, he tied the score with a three pointer.

Odom slammed. Early in the fourth quarter, his dunk and subsequent free throw gave the Lakers a four-point lead.

Odom strutted. Or, at least he tried to strut after that screaming dunk, but it looked painfully like a guy trying to walk on stilts.

"The back is the core of your body; we can't do anything out there without using the back," Odom said. "Like I said, I'm out there."

He made more shots. He grabbed more rebounds. He threw a full-court pass that led to two points.

On one play, he was blocking Kenyon Martin's layup. On another play, he was diving to steal a loose ball from Linas Kleiza.

He was knocked out of a shoe during one hard foul, and painfully bent over to put it back on. He was standing in front of the fans during one break with the Lakers leading by 11, and he carefully slapped high five with a fan.

"Using everything we had to win a basketball game," he said, and how he walked that walk.

It was a night in which the Lakers used everything, it seemed, except common sense.

Before the game, in an incident that brought howls of excitement and disbelief, singer Tyrese Gibson purposely changed the words to the national .

Instead of singing that "our flag was still there," he sang, "our *Lakers* were still there."

Not cute. Not cool. If the Lakers want somebody to sing their own anthem before the game, that's fine, but don't mess with the one belonging to all of us.

The only change that was worth cheering Wednesday was the one in Lamar Odom, staggered but sturdy, carrying them another step toward home.

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