

## Commentary: Odom's unsung, but he doesn't really mind

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When Jim Harrick paid him a visit at Staples Center a while back, he had a happy hug for his University of Rhode Island coach.

When Randy Pfund was mentioned the other day, he smiled and said of his Miami Heat general manager, "He's my guy."

This is one of Lamar Odom's character traits. He remembers and appreciates the people who helped him get where he is today.

Where he is at the moment is on the way with the Lakers to the NBA Finals.

Yes, there is the obligatory fifth game of the semifinal round, aka the Western Conference championship round, tonight in Staples Center against San Antonio. It presumably is the final game for the defending champion Spurs.

For all the attention NBA MVP Kobe Bryant understandably draws, for all the attention final-major-piece-of-the-

puzzle Pau Gasol also understandably draws, the Lakers would not be in this position without

major contributions from Odom.

But Odom is the quiet one on Lakers. His game is relatively quiet. So is his personality. In many ways, he's Lou Gehrig to Babe Ruth, Kevin McHale to Larry Bird or in more recent times Eric Karros to Mike Piazza. He goes about his business without drawing a lot of attention to himself. Unless he's not scoring enough to please the electorate.

When his points dip, and it happens to all but a select few, just ask San Antonio's Manu Ginobili and Boston's Ray Allen, he becomes a lightning rod for attention, all of which is negative.

What praise he receives is faint because it generally includes a footnote about him not meeting the expectations of others.

Ask him about this and he'll shrug. It's simply not his style to rant.

He'll let you figure it out. If you're smart enough to do so. If you're not, he'll shrug again. Such is life.

What is lost is his consistency across the board. He's going to be there with double figures in rebounds most nights. His assist total tends to be impressive. He brings the ball up court like no other 6-foot-10 player. His defense, passable when he joined the Lakers for the 2004-05 season, has improved noticeably.

What all this does is make everyone around him better.

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A calm demeanor is another plus for the New York native who now enjoys the good life living in Manhattan Beach.

Back when he was playing for Rhode Island in a game at Pepperdine, Harrick, previously the coach at Morningside High, Inglewood and Pepperdine, provided an uncomplicated scouting report: good player, good guy, will grow and develop into a very good pro.

What about those who attack him?

Sorry, he's a solid player who does a lot of things very well who is not one of the great scorers in the league. Accept that as a fact. But what you get is pretty darn good.

Yet another fact is his game continues to improve. Although this is his ninth season in the NBA, he's only 28 years old. He's just entering what should be the peak years of his career. Give him another half dozen shots a game and watch his scoring go up accordingly.

The most obvious reason for him not scoring more, beyond the manner in which Bryant is a magnet for the ball, are the multiple roles the Lakers assign to him. Instead of having his spot on the floor, from which he can develop and concentrate on a couple of moves with a couple of counter moves, he's all over the place.

He's asked to flow from power forward to small forward to center. He plays with his back to the basket. He plays on the wing, facing the basket. He moves to the backcourt to initiate the

offense. He brings the ball up court as the middle man on the fast break.

His versatility makes the Lakers more versatile and therefore more dangerous. There are times when it makes him less dangerous because the move required of him may be a move he has not used or worked on recently.

He has a personality and a game that do not clash with Bryant.

That's critical to the success of the Lakers. Just check the Bryant-Shaquille O'Neal history book for everything you need to know about this subject.

The rare occasion when Odom was not quiet was following Game 3 in San Antonio. It was the lone Spurs win. He blamed himself for the Lakers losing.

It hurt that he only scored seven points. Lost in the rush to zap him: he led the team in rebounds with 11 and in assists with six.

By assuming the blame, he distracted attention from others who played below par. You can assume his teammates know this and were appreciative.

He reverted to his standard unassuming, he's-not-going-to-trip-over-his-ego approach after he scored 16 points with nine rebounds when the Lakers won the fourth game. He did not credit himself for helping get the team rolling in the fourth quarter with a couple of big defensive

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rebounds and then scoring eight points during the stretch run.

That's not one of Lamar Odom's character traits.

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