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## Intel: Odom the Lakers' real MVP?

By Eric Neel  
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On the strength of his 19 points and 14 rebounds in Game 5 of the Western Conference finals, consider for a moment the somewhat counterintuitive claim (made with all due respect to the Black Mamba and Señor Gasol) that [Lamar Odom](#) may actually be the [Los Angeles Lakers'](#) MVP.

The 6-foot-10 power forward has a reputation for being moody and inconsistent; a force one night, a zero the next. But during the 2008-09 season, it's Odom who has surprisingly posted the Lakers' highest plus/minus score per 48 minutes of playing time (plus-14.4, as opposed to [Kobe Bryant](#) at plus-10.7 and [Pau Gasol](#) at plus-9.1).

So while Kobe is unquestionably the Lakers' best player, and an injury to him would obviously be a devastating blow, Odom is still the team's bellwether. As he showed in Game 5, the diverse qualities he brings to the court are capable of raising the Lakers to a different level and encouraging his teammates (especially Kobe) to play in a more balanced fashion.

His varied skill set -- a quick and crazy-long body with mad handle -- makes him capable of putting up potent individual numbers both inside and out; witness the season-high 20 boards against the Hawks, the 28 points he laid on the Cavs, the seven assists he dropped on both Phoenix and Detroit, and the 26 shots he's blocked this postseason.

This versatility and unusual body type allow the Lakers to make fluid, on-the-fly adjustments against different types of teams. By creating speed and agility mismatches down low when he's playing the 4, and height, range and vision mismatches around the perimeter when he's playing the 3 or even the 2, he frequently tips the balance of the floor in the Lakers' direction.

"There aren't many 4s who can do what he can do athletically. His ability to handle the ball, to get to the boards, to make open shots, it's a problem for the other team on most nights," Lakers assistant coach Jim Cleamons explains. "And there are not many 2s who are as big as he is either, and that means we can send him to the boards from the 2, and so he gives us leverage no matter where we ask him to play."

The obvious benefit of Odom's flexibility is that it allows the Lakers to confidently mix "big" and "little" lineups over the course of a game or a series. "You can play power ball with [Andrew Bynum](#) at the 5, Pau at the 4, and Lamar at the 3 or the 2," Cleamons says. "Then when we get [Trevor Ariza](#), Odom, and Kobe on the floor together you get a 2/3/4 who can almost switch everything, act as a kind of a sniper group that can take the ball out of certain guys' hands, and be more fluid and stretch the floor."

In the triangle offense, space and flexibility, room to improvise angles of attack, are crucial. On offense, Odom not only works in the gaps, he creates them. In both the "power ball" and "switchable" groups Cleamons describes, Odom's presence (even on nights he is not shooting the ball particularly well), and the fact teams have to account for the threat of his mobility as both a

distributor and a producer who begins each possession with a built-in edge, opens the floor and facilitates the Lakers' passing game (note the 25 Los Angeles assists on Odom's big night in Game 5).

And while the rap on Odom is that he creates mismatches all over the floor but doesn't always exploit them, the numbers say he's actually laying a hurt on guys. Odom pulls down 13.3 rebounds per 48 minutes this season, while his opponents at the 4-spot, head-to-head, grab only 10.5 rebounds per 48. The average power forward guarding him this year manages just 0.9 blocks per 48 (league average is 1.1) but Odom tallies 2.1 against his opposite number. And when he plays the smaller roles, while he's taking fewer shots and scoring less than his opponents, he's outperforming them as a facilitator (5.6 assists per 48 to his counterparts' 3.7).

He'll never be as explosive or relentless as Kobe. And he'll never be as good at a singular task as Gasol is at creating quick, efficient shots from the block. But still, we have to ask: Do either of these guys (or anyone else on the Lakers) do more things, in more places than L.O.?

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