



## Boston Celtics

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# Bill Reynolds: I always root for Lamar Odom, who's back in the NBA Finals

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I always root for Lamar Odom.

I root for him because once upon a time I went to the small row house in Queens where he grew up with his grandmother, his childhood trophies on a living-room table, and around the corner was the small playground where he used to go to shoot by himself when he was 12 years old and had just found out his mother had died.

I root for him because I first met him in the fall of 1997, when he had circuitously arrived at URI, looking for a place to land, a time in his life when he later said that "I was as lost as lost could be."

I root for him because back then his future was swirling all around him, the promise of the NBA and all its gold hovering over him. He had been the kid who had gone to three high schools in his senior year and had gone to UNLV before his test score was questioned by the NCAA, a poster child for all of the supposed ills of college basketball, a kid whose life could have gone in any direction back then.

I root for him because back then, amid all the underlying chaos and drama that was always part of the story, there was a fragility to Lamar, someone who, regardless of all the talent and all the potential, was still just a kid. There always was something very likable about him, even when he was doing something that could make you shake your head. There always was something about him that made you wish he would make it.

All that was a decade ago, back there in that amazing chapter in URI basketball history that was the Jim Harrick Era at URI, back when the college game was changing in front of our eyes and Odom was on the front lines of that change, even if we didn't always know that at the time.

We all knew then that Lamar was never going to establish any longtime ties to Kingston. We all knew he was never going to be at URI for the long haul, that it was just a way station, a place to put some of his personal demons back in their cages and get back on the NBA's radar screen.

We also knew back then that we were witnessing a bigtime talent, someone who had the potential to go far away from Keaney Gym and the Atlantic 10 Conference, someone who had the chance to go to the biggest arenas in the country.

Which is where he is now, of course, in his second straight NBA Finals.

He is 29 now but already in his 10th NBA season. He was drafted by the Clippers, spent time in Miami, and has been with the Lakers since 2004. Three years before that he had been suspended for a while for violating the NBA's drug policy, and three years ago his young son suffered a crib death. So his NBA career hasn't always been a joyride. Real life sometimes has nothing to do with cheers and big paychecks.

Last year, he averaged 14 points and 10 rebounds a game for the Lakers, one of the main reasons they got to the finals. This year, it's been more of the same: 11 points, 8 rebounds.

And he just might be the Lakers' most important player. Not the best, certainly. But when Odom plays well, the Lakers usually play well.

Not that he always plays well.

The knock on him always has been that he's the ultimate tease, someone who has the tools to be better than he is. There's little doubt about the tools. He's 6-foot-10, can handle the ball like a guard, can make perimeter shots, and also has the height and length to play inside. In short, if you were going to sit in some laboratory and come up with the perfect NBA body, you might just come up with Lamar Odom.

So why isn't he great?

That's the question.

I suspect there are a couple of reasons — one that's about basketball and one that's more about him.

His basketball problem is, in a curious sense, his versatility. NBA greatness is usually about doing one thing better than just about everyone else. Lamar does many things very well, but nothing great. He's not a great shooter. He's not a great rebounder or a great defensive player. Instead, he is a basketball Renaissance Man, a little of this, a little of that, all in a rangy, 6-10 frame.

He's also not a basketball "killer," almost a prerequisite for those who become truly great.

That's simply not his personality. It's also not his game. He is a finesse player, always has been, even in the one year he was at URI. He never was a tough guy.

In many ways, he has become a great complementary player. Certainly, that's his role on the Lakers. And when he plays well the Lakers usually win.

In a sense, though, all of that is nitpicking.

Wouldn't we have taken Odom being in the NBA Finals back there in the fall of 1997, when he was as lost as lost could be?

You bet we would have.

He has come so very far from where he was when he first showed up at URI in the fall of '97, as lost as lost could be. Has come so very far from that small row house in Queens, and the chaos of his childhood. Has come so very far from when he first arrived at URI, his future as up in the air as one of his dunks. Has come so very far from all of the drama that always has seemed to surround

him, back when he was the centerpiece in one of the more amazing sagas in URI basketball history.

For Lamar Odom has had an unbelievable basketball journey, one we were all fortunate to see a piece of.

At least I was.

The reason I always root for him.

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