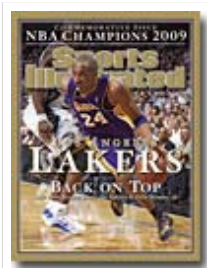
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June 25, 2009

Happy Ending

LAMAR ODOM'S ODYSSEY FROM A WASTED TALENT TO THE HEART OF THE LAKERS IS A TRUE HOLLYWOOD STORY

Lee Jenkins

THE HAPPIEST LAKER IS THE ONE WHOSE father was addicted to heroin; whose mother died of colon cancer when he was 12; who attended three high schools; had his first college scholarship revoked before the fall semester of his freshman year; became a subject of three college investigations; declared for the NBA draft; tried unsuccessfully to pull out of the draft; was picked by arguably the worst franchise in sports; violated the league's antidrug policy twice within eight months; and, after finally getting his life together, went home to New York City for an aunt's funeral and wound up burying his 6½-month-old son, Jayden, then getting robbed at gunpoint.

"That's my book," says Lamar Odom. "That's my movie. It's a big bowl of gumbo."

As he ponders working titles for his life story—"This is L.A., so you never know," he says—he is wearing a white sweat suit and driving a white Mercedes down Interstate 405 to an autograph signing in Orange County, one hand on the steering wheel and another deep inside a bag of potato chips. Every few minutes he turns and glances at the backseat, where his 10-year-old daughter, Destiny, and seven-year-old son, Lamar Jr., are occupied with their own snacks.

"My grandmother was always upbeat, a naturally happy person," he says, chomping on the chips. "I think I got that from her." His grandmother was Mildred Mercer, who raised him when his parents were gone. She died on June 28, 2003, three years to the day before his baby boy.

Maybe Grandma Mildred is to thank for one of the most irrepressible personalities in the NBA, a 6' 10" forward who, at 29, has been in the league for 10 seasons and famous for nearly half his life and yet still wears his mitt when he goes to baseball games in the hope of catching a foul ball and asks the staffer behind him on the team's plane for permission to recline his seat because "my legs are kind of long." More than an hour into the autograph signing in Huntington Beach, Destiny spotted a bulge in her dad's left sneaker. "What's that?" she asked. Odom reached into his size-16 hightop and pulled out the crumpled potato chip bag. "I didn't know what else to do with it," he said. Destiny smiled and shook her head.

WHILE KOBE BRYANT IS THE KING OF THE Staples Center, Odom is a gifted and versatile court jester. "I've heard fans yell to him in the middle of games, 'Nice shot!' and he'll turn around and say, 'Thanks, man,'" says John Ireland, sideline reporter for Lakers telecasts on KCAL 9. Topics in his interviews range from his favorite TV show (MacGyver) to his alter ego ("There's Lamar, who's humble, and then there's Odom") to his unconventional wardrobe. Says point guard Derek Fisher, "He's our new Shaquille O'Neal."

Odom carries himself with an ease and optimism reminiscent of O'Neal and before that Magic Johnson, but he is an original. He signed with UNLV in part because he stopped in a Las Vegas nightclub on his recruiting visit and saw a rap group from New York City, which he interpreted as an omen. He would wind up at Rhode Island, where in his first meeting with coach Jim Harrick he asked for a backpack. Odom declared for the draft after one season at Rhode Island, but he had such misgivings about the move that he hatched a plan to play for the Celtics while commuting to URI to continue his class work. "It would have been groundbreaking," he says. After it became clear that the NBA is indeed a full-time job—Odom was taken fourth by the Clippers in 1999—he hired a tennis agent who had never represented a basketball player before. Don't question his intuition, though. That tennis agent, Jeff Schwartz, is now one of the premier agents in the NBA, with a client list that includes Paul Pierce, Jason Kidd and Josh Howard.

BEFORE EVERY GAME THE LAKERS LOCK ARMS and form a circle around Odom. He is an unusual centerpiece: not their captain, not their best player, not even their second-best player. But when the lights dim and the decibels rise and Odom starts bouncing up and down in the middle of the circle—"We're the best team in the NBA!" he shouts—the Lakers bounce with him.

Growing up, Odom's idol was Magic, not Michael. He preferred to dish rather than dunk. "When we had college scouts come watch us, he wouldn't shoot," says Joseph Arbitello, a former teammate of Odom's at Christ the King, in Queens, N.Y., and now the coach and athletic director there. "He

wanted to make everybody else look good." Odom's reluctance to score drove coaches crazy but made him beloved by teammates. "Lamar is not the kind of guy who will ever say, 'F--- this, give me the ball,'" says Gary Charles, who coached Odom's AAU team, the Long Island Panthers. "He could not score a point and be happy as heck."

He may have inherited his good nature from Grandma Mildred, but he gets his perspective from personal experience. He sat at his mother's bedside as she took her final breath. He held his son's body for three hours after young Jayden succumbed to sudden infant death syndrome. Odom was kicked out of UNLV before he'd played a single game—a graduate assistant knocked on his door and informed him that he was being released from his scholarship because his ACT score had come into question. He was admitted to Rhode Island only as "a nonmatriculating student" and was not allowed to play so much as intramural basketball. He wept at a press conference with the Clippers after the league had suspended him a second time for smoking marijuana. "People used to call me Little Lloyd," Odom says, referring to Lloyd Daniels, a fun-loving, ball handling big man from the New York City playgrounds who went to UNLV, was arrested for buying cocaine and later was shot three times in a drug dispute. Daniels survived and kept playing basketball, but his name is synonymous with talent wasted.

Odom's name, on the other hand, is synonymous with talent salvaged.

In the past five years he has overhauled his reputation, proving that he is not the slacker who left Christ the King because of poor grades or the mercenary who took \$5,600 from a UNLV booster, landing the school on probation after he left, or the enigma who would take off from Rhode Island's campus for days at a time, turning off his phone and checking into a hotel to find a little solitude. After signing a six-year, \$65 million free-agent deal with the Heat in 2003, he started an AAU basketball program called Team Odom so that the next generation of prodigies might receive better guidance than he did. He even apologized recently to his coach with the Clippers, Alvin Gentry, believing he was somehow responsible for Gentry's firing in 2003.

"Lamar came to see me a few years ago, and he told me he was lucky he survived," says Bob Oliva, Odom's coach at Christ the King. "I told him his mother must have been looking down on him from heaven."

To an outsider, it may seem that Odom hides his grief beneath a veil of humor, but in fact he confronts it first thing every morning. Besides the traditional memorials—tattoos of family members and names scrawled on sneakers—his bedroom in Manhattan Beach is filled with photographs of his mom, Cathy Mercer, and of Jayden. "I look at them right when I wake up," he says. "That's when I like to reflect on things." When Mercer died, Odom ran to the basketball court at Lincoln Park in Queens and shot jumpers all night. But when Jayden died, Odom recognized that he would need more than blacktop to heal. He spent two years seeing William Parham, a psychologist from UCLA, and after sessions he would walk out and tell the Lakers' trainers, "I feel like I just went to the bathroom." He meant it in the most therapeutic way.

HOW ODOM'S ODYSSEY affects his game is something Phil Jackson is still figuring out. Every player has swings in his stat line, but Odom can score 23 points in a game, as he did on Feb. 26 against the Suns, and then score four, as he did in Phoenix three days later. "Most of it with Lamar is internal," Jackson says. "It's part of his psyche. He's distracted at times. We try to work with him a lot on focus." Asked if Odom's lapses are connected to his personal saga, Jackson says, "Without a doubt."

Odom's career path would have been much simpler if he had followed Bryant straight to the pros, but he wasn't wired that way. Bryant is preternaturally assertive, Odom deferential. What makes them different makes them jibe. Odom's inconsistency invites outrage among talk-radio callers and message-board posters who clamor for him to be more aggressive, more like Bryant. But the last time the team had two players with the same self-interests, one of them had to be shipped to Miami. Odom was one of the key players acquired from the Heat in the 2004 trade of Shaq.

"A lot of people have wasted a lot of time thinking about who they want Lamar Odom to be rather than appreciating him for who he is," says Jeff Van Gundy, the ESPN analyst who was coaching the Knicks when Odom was making headlines as a New York City high school star. "I always look back at where he started. In stories like his, you don't see a lot of happy endings. So when you do see one, I think it should be celebrated."


Odom has a clothing line (Rich Soil) that includes scores of T-shirts depicting animals and religious images. But there is one emblazoned with a framed black-and-white photograph of a basketball court. It is the court at Lincoln Park where Odom played the night his mother died.

Superimposed over the bottom-right corner is a bright red rose. As Odom walks on the beach, about as far from that court as he can get in the continental U.S., he is asked if the rose is a symbol of his mom. "No," he says. "It's a symbol of what can grow, even from there."

The rose is Lamar.

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