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Sports : Columnists

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T.J. SIMERS:

Odom's perseverance should be lesson

March 14 2007

If you're a parent, you can't look at **Lamar Odom** without wondering how he got through it. Or, how he gets through it.

It'd be like that with anyone, but tougher still when you're looking at someone so approachable, so good-hearted and full of well wishes. Good things are supposed to happen to good people.

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But looking at him, sitting here on a table alongside the Lakers' practice court, two ice bags bandaged across his left shoulder and two more across his right knee, the inclination is to stop and ask, "Who did you tick off?"

His mother died, his grandmother died, last year his infant son died in his crib — and how many fretful times have we all gone back to the baby's room to take one more peek inside? He was in New York for a funeral at the time of his son's death.

Three weeks ago, "my man," as Odom called **Dennis Johnson**,

died.

A target of criticism for his inconsistent play as a professional athlete, Odom returned from a tragic summer to play All-Star level basketball — 18 points a game, nine rebounds — and then injured his knee. He returned, only to tear a muscle in his left shoulder.

Yet he sits here smiling, and with a shake of his head, dismisses the suggestion that somehow he's being treated unfairly.

"I can't think like that," he says. "Someone might have lost a loved one today or filed for bankruptcy while wondering what they are going to do for food or where they might sleep tonight.

"It's just life. Everybody goes through it. It doesn't matter whether you're a banker, politician or an athlete. God has a different movie script for all of us."

THE LAKERS are going five on five in practice, with assistant coach **Brian Shaw** defending Odom. Odom accepts a pass while coming across the middle, attacks the basket and scores — with his right hand.

He hears it from everyone.

"I'm like Spider-Man," he says later. "When one of my senses goes, I just grow another."

Funny thing, "people were saying, force him right ever since I was 10 years old," adds Odom, notorious for playing the game almost exclusively with his left hand. "But now I'm going to be conscious of playing more with two hands."

He says he will be aggressive, and if practice is any indication, he will attack the rim. He shoots from long range over Shaw, misses, but says later there is no pain when attempting a jump shot.

"I'm going to be in situations where I grimace or grab it," Odom says of his shoulder,

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"but it's time to play."

He says he will undergo another MRI exam at season's end to determine the extent of his injury and whether it will require surgery. But he talks as if he already knows, and expects surgery and the four or five months of rehabilitation that will follow.

It probably explains why he's back on the court now — why not go ahead and play, if surgery is already a foregone conclusion?

"I didn't have to come back; I could have said, that's it," Odom says. "And I know if I go out and hurt my shoulder, some people might even call me stupid. But I'm back because I want to win.

"The Lakers have taken care of me, so I feel I should go out there and play basketball for them. Denver is right on our heels so I feel I owe it to myself and the Laker organization to do what I can."

WHEN THE NBA stars got together in Las Vegas last summer to begin three-year preparations for the Olympics, Odom was supposed to be with them. But the death of his 6 1/2 -month-old son kept him away.

Several NBA players wondered out loud if it might be best for him to join them, knowing what unconditional support he would find from his peers. One assistant coach talked about calling Odom with the suggestion.

"No way I would do that," Odom says. "It would've been so selfish for me to go and play basketball. My children and their mother needed me. My son is 6 now, my daughter 9, but for an 8-year-old girl at the time — how do you explain something like that? My daughter really needed me.

"When we began this season against Phoenix, I almost broke down on the court. I hit a three and I just started to think about it. There was a timeout and I just had to go off to the side and get control of myself. I knew right then — there was no way I could've come back and played at the end of the summer."

So how goes it now — less than nine months later?

"I'm an optimist," he says. "As far as I'm concerned, the glass is always half-full. I believe God gives it to the people who can handle it. I'm only 27, and who knows, I might break the record and live to be 140. I have so much more to go in life."

THE LAKERS look as if they are down for the count, but Odom will be playing with them in Denver on Thursday night. He says he will be thinking about his shoulder, all right, "but I think I came back this season more focused than ever.

"There's not too much more for me to go through after what has happened to me, so what's an injury?" he says with a grin.

He would like to finish the Lakers' season contributing to a playoff run. And would still like to put himself in the running to join the Olympic hopefuls but understands surgery may cancel those plans.

"I'm the only guy who can't make the All-Star team who comes and plays for his country," Odom says with more than a hint of sarcasm. "But I like the way I was playing before I hurt my knee."

Before he injured his knee, "I thought I was going to be an All-Star," he says. "But look what happened to that kid [Shaun Livingston] with the Clippers. Things happen. And they can either break you, or make you better."

And maybe from now on, when you look at Lamar Odom, that's the first thought that should come to mind.

*

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