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BILL PLASCHKE:

Odom perseveres, but time may be running out

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A huge white T-shirt hangs prominently in Lamar Odom's Staples Center locker. It serves not as clothing, but as a memorial.

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On the shirt is a drawing of the smiling face of Odom's infant son Jayden, who was 6 months old last summer when he died suddenly in his crib.

Odom walked to that shirt Sunday afternoon with a sigh.

"Life is pain," he said.

He had just finished throwing his aching body around the court for 35 minutes in the Lakers' 113-100 playoff loss to the Phoenix Suns. Now he was going to do something even more difficult.

He was going to get dressed.

As he gingerly pulled up his pants, he gasped. As he carefully stretched into his shirt, he groaned.

When he finally turned around to face the media, he apologized for the giant beads of sweat that still rolled off his face. Some of it was from the game. But some of it was from that pain.

He took a giant swig of grape juice from a bottle. He stared into the distance and winced.

"It is what it is," Odom said.

Except when it's something much more.

As the Lakers predictably fell behind three games to one in an NBA first-round series that should end Wednesday in Phoenix, Odom's story was about more than his 17 second-half points and 10 second-half rebounds.

It was about more than how he fought through three injuries that would sideline most men — torn shoulder labrum, hyperextended elbow, sore knee — to make plays and lead cheers.

It was even about more than how, in the wake of great personal strife, he has had an extraordinary season that should rank among the most heartfelt in Lakers history.

Sunday was about all of those things, but none of those things.

Because Sunday was mostly about how Lamar Odom may be doing them for the Lakers for the last time.

This team will change. It has to change. As anyone watching Sunday will agree, the Lakers have become the Denvers and Minnesotas of the NBA, only with cooler uniforms.

As constructed, they are capable of making the playoffs and stealing a game or two, but nothing more.

As constructed, Kobe Bryant needs some all-star help.

And perhaps the best person to be traded for that help is Odom, who, because his style clashes with Bryant's, may have more value somewhere else.

And that's a shame, because, as Sunday again proved, no Laker has inspired more.

"I love it here, I hope I have done enough to prove that I belong here the rest of my career," he said while walking slowly to his car. "But as a team, sometimes you get stuck between a rock and a hard place. We're expected to win, and we haven't won, and they're going to do everything they can to get back to winning."



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If this means dealing Odom, then his last act as a Laker would fittingly be the tossing of his bulky black elbow brace across the court as he walked off in disgust.

He was mad at his body, which was so tightly covered in pads and tape Sunday that, once, he actually was called for delay of game when he couldn't get his armor fitted in time.

"I was wrapped up like a mummy out there," he said, shaking his head.

He was mad at his team for not competing at Thursday night's level, for reverting to the attitude that last week caused him to publicly ask for more camaraderie.

"We had our chance, and we just didn't take it," he said. "They just beat us. They just played better basketball."

Finally, mostly, he was mad at a season that has never seemed to end.

"It's been one thing after another," he said.

The only consistent was that Odom never stopped working.

He could have disappeared after the death of his son. He didn't.

He could have walked away after tearing his shoulder. He wouldn't.

He could have stayed on the bench Sunday after injuring his elbow Thursday. Not a chance.

"We get taken care of very well to do something we love," he said. "Because of that, you have a responsibility to your coaches and your team to go out there and play."

So Sunday, he played, even with an elbow so sore he couldn't straighten it on free throws, making just two of six.

You could see him grimace with each shot. You could see him bite his lip with every collision.

He made just one basket in the first half while struggling with two fouls, and he wondered if he should leave. But he refused, and if his second half was his final half as a Laker, it was a hearty farewell indeed.

In one stretch, he scored six consecutive points on drives to the basket, keeping the Lakers close. Another time, he painfully raised his arms to lead the crowd in a chant of, "Dee-fense, dee-fense."

He had as many assists in the second half — three — as the three Laker ballhandling guards had in the entire game combined.

He had more second-half rebounds — 10 — than any other Laker had for the entire game.

"It's like his body doesn't matter, it's all about the team," said Ronny Turiaf. "He never says anything about the pain, but we all see it, every day, we see him being a leader."

It was not enough, of course. Until the Lakers add more pieces, it will never be enough.

"My grandmother told me that you are always either coming into a storm, in the middle of a storm, or coming out of a storm," Odom said.

And where are you?

"I guess I'm in the middle of one," he said, pausing. "But I'm coming out."

He only hopes he will still be wearing a Lakers uniform when he does.

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