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BASKETBALL; Tested by Hardship, the Lakers' Odom Presses On With a Survivor's Instinct

By LIZ ROBBINS

The year, thankfully, is almost over for Lamar Odom. Cruel losses have chased his victories, and a rain-soaked funeral can still leave him in tears.

But he will gladly toast to 2007 and to the bounty of blessings that remain.

Odom, a 6-foot-10 forward for the Los Angeles Lakers, was working toward an All-Star season when he sprained his right knee Dec. 12 against Houston and learned he would miss a minimum of four weeks.

Jerry DeGregorio, who has coached Odom in high school, college and the pros, and who has been like a father to him since Odom was a 16-year-old star from Jamaica, Queens, called him the morning after the injury.

"He told me: 'Coach, I've already been through so much and I've survived it. I'll be fine,' " DeGregorio said last week in a telephone interview.

Odom is one of the casualties on an expanding injury list of prominent N.B.A. players, which includes Miami's Shaquille O'Neal, Seattle's Rashard Lewis and Houston's Yao Ming. His rehabilitation, Odom said in a telephone interview Thursday, is going slower than he expected, and he may not return for another few weeks.

But with a kind and genuine spirit that has made him the most popular player in the Lakers' locker room, Odom, 27, adopts the same optimism that has sustained him through a lifetime of turbulence. "It's not like being injured is going to dampen my spirits or make me ask the question, 'Why me?' " Odom said Thursday from Los Angeles.

He never asked that question when his 6 1/2-month-old son, Jayden, died of sudden infant death syndrome in his crib in late June in New York. He never wondered why that occurred on the three-year anniversary of the death of his grandmother Mildred Mercer. Instead, he was comforted by the spiritual connection.

Mercer, whose lucky number, 7, Odom wears, reared him after his mother, Cathy, died of colon cancer when Odom was 12.

This past summer began inauspiciously when Odom returned to New York for the funeral of one of his mother's sisters. Then more than 200 people attended Jayden's funeral as torrential rains battered the tiny coffin. Odom had cradled Jayden for hours in the hospital after doctors could not revive him.

Less than a month later, Odom was robbed at gunpoint in Queens by someone he recognized from the neighborhood. The robber's warning shot rattled Odom to his already numb core. "Life is so fragile," he said. "I've got so much to live for."

Odom spent last week in New York with his 8-year-old daughter, Destiny, his 5-year-old son, L. J., and their mother, Liza Morales, his longtime companion. The family watched the Lakers lose on Christmas Day against

Miami, where Odom played one season before the Heat traded him to the Lakers as part of the deal for O'Neal. L. J. squealed each time his favorite player, Dwyane Wade, scored, making Odom cringe but laugh.

Although he misses basketball, Odom has used the time to rehabilitate more than his knee. Overcome with grief, he wanted to quit last summer. The Lakers persuaded him to immerse himself in basketball as therapy.

"During the summer, I kept myself so busy doing so many things, I didn't really mourn," Odom said. "It gave me time to think. I would wake up in the morning and look at my tattoo of my son.

"A year went by so fast, from him being born to him not being here," Odom said, putting his injury in perspective. "What's three more weeks?"

The Lakers were 14-6 before Odom twisted his knee and are 5-5 since, close to the Western Conference lead because of Kobe Bryant's play. But Bryant realized during the feisty first-round playoff loss to Phoenix last season that the Lakers excelled when Odom was less a complementary piece -- always a criticism of him -- and more aggressive.

"Last year, I had to remind him, 'Do you want to be a great player or do you want to be an eh player?'" Bryant said. "This year, I haven't had to do that at all."

Odom said his son's death and his mugging had emboldened him to take control on the court. He was gratified that Bryant told him, "You're smelling blood."

Still, Odom's game parallels his personality: congenial, reliable and versatile. Able to play any of the five positions, he is averaging a career-high 17.5 points, 8.7 rebounds and 4.9 assists this season.

"We miss him," forward Luke Walton said. "Lamar's the one who picks everybody up."

In the turmoil of the 2004 Olympics, Odom was the player whom Coaches Larry Brown and Gregg Popovich leaned on the most. "He's one of the most talented players in the league," Popovich, the San Antonio Spurs' coach, said recently. "At his size, to be able to do what he can do offensively, defensively and rebounding-wise is pretty unique.

"I've always thought that it's been a confidence thing with him -- understanding he can do what he does for 48 minutes, not just for a while."

Odom's evolution is more telling considering he is in the same city where his career began at 19 with the Los Angeles Clippers as the No. 4 pick in the 1999 draft.

"I've watched him grow from a teenager into a much more responsible, assertive man," Odom's longtime agent, Jeff Schwartz, said. "It's been a process born out of his accomplishments and tragedy mixed in together."

As the captain of the Clippers, the N.B.A.'s youngest team, Odom acknowledged that he was ill-prepared for the responsibility of leadership. "I fell into things I wasn't supposed to be doing, hanging out, partying," he said. "I got suspended twice, so right there that kind of changes my story."

In a tearful, apologetic 2001 news conference, Odom admitted he used marijuana, drawing a five-game suspension for a second offense. "Doubt and humiliation," Odom said, "that can take your confidence."

But true to his penchant for turning trouble inside out, he added: "It's what's made me. Not scoring 25 or 26 every night."

DeGregorio, who was a Clippers assistant and scout when Odom was there, was not surprised to see him struggle. "Lamar was a young man playing a man's game," he said.

He advised Odom not to leave after his freshman year at Rhode Island, after the teenage odyssey that got him there: a period spanning three high schools, an investigation into test scores that resulted in a revoked scholarship at Nevada-Las Vegas, a citation for solicitation of prostitution in Las Vegas and academic ineligibility at Rhode Island.

Odom had declared for the N.B.A. draft, only to change his mind, but he had already relinquished his eligibility by signing with an agent, whom he later fired.

It was not until the summer of 2003, when Odom's grandmother died and he signed as a free agent with the Heat that he matured under the discipline of the Heat president, Pat Riley. "I understood about being passionate about what you do, how to give effort and energy every night," Odom said. "It takes time."

Lakers Coach Phil Jackson sometimes has to remind Odom to keep his focus. But Jackson cannot help rooting for him.

"Lamar is one of those hard-knock kids," Jackson said. "We just keep saying, 'You're a good person, good things will happen to you.' There are times when it doesn't look that way, but we tell him there's a karmic action in life that will work for you."

Odom, DeGregorio said, has never been bitter despite his circumstances. Instead, he shares the karma he has. This summer, Odom plans to hold another community party in Lincoln Park in Queens. The event drew more than 3,200 people two years ago.

Odom is busy developing a line of religious T-shirts and working on a record label, Rich Soil, that he founded in 2005 with the Queens rapper Ali Vegas. The label's name comes from Vegas's lyrics "I'm from the land of rich soil, expect the branches to follow."

Odom said: "It's being urban, knowing about the finer things in life, trying to do better, trying to give back. It's about not being rich in money."

Now, Odom is rich in memories. When he returns to the team, Jayden's angelic face will greet him, painted on to a size 5XL T-shirt that hangs in Odom's locker at the Staples Center.

"At first I didn't want to put it there because I didn't want to damper the spirit," he said. "I didn't want pity. But there's a difference between dwelling and keeping things close. I have pictures of my mother up in my room, pictures of my grandmother.

"It's easy to forget. I need things like that to remember."