



THE NBA FINALS: TURNING BACK THE CLOCK?

BY Kerry Schmidt 06-01-2008

Pro basketball is the only sport that starts in the very early fall and doesn't end until nearly summer.

That's why I often don't pay much attention to it until at least the 2nd round of the playoffs, and in years past, not to much excitement even then.

But since I am a 30-year die hard Lakers' fan, I am stoked right now.

And it may just be like turning the clock back to the 80's.

But first, have you noticed how, all of a sudden, a great many NBA players have suddenly become brilliant? Yea.

I don't know who in hell came up with this comment, but if I hear "...so and so has such a high basketball IQ," I think I'll puke on my 52" plasma.

I mean, have all NBA players been stupid for the last 40 years? Well now, they all are geniuses.

Some huge glandular case who can barely talk without prop cards is suddenly a genius.

Boston finished off the tough Pistons Friday night, so the finals will be, once again, between the Lakers and Celtics.

Thus, it will definitely be the 1980's "de ja vue all over again," to quote Yogi Berra.

During those 80's either and/or the Lakers and the Celtics were in the finals 11 straight times.

Wait, you say, there are only 10 years in the 80's. When you count 1980, through 1989, that makes 11. I know, I spent 10 minutes on my calculator.

And, the Lakers and Celtics met three times, with LA winning 2 of 3.

The Lakers were in the finals in 1980, 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 88 and 89.

The Celtics were there in 81 and 86, and vs. LA in 84, 85, and 87.

The Lakers were "Showtime," with Magic and Kareem, and Boston was "Gritty," with Bird and McHale.

Quite likely, there has never been such a one on one rivalry in the game as there was with Magic and Bird. Black man versus white man. You could not say that, but it certainly made it even more, well, magic.

This rivalry started in 1979, when Magic led Michigan State to the NCAA title over Bird's Indiana State.

And for those 11 years, you heard Boston fans screaming "Beat LA," with LA countering "Boston Sucks."

Fittingly, Magic and Bird - who for several years while playing each other, there was "no love lost," but they since have good become friends and now will chronicle a new chapter of this great rivalry.

Hall-of-Famer Bill Walton said, "No one will ever have that kind of impact on the game again....Magic and Larry represent a dying breed."

They have signed on to write a book about their rivalry and (later) their friendship. It will be written by *Boston Globe* columnist Jackie MacMullan, due out in the fall of 2009.

Some can say that Wilt Chamberlain/Bill Russell was just as big, except that Russell won an unprecedented 11 NBA rings and Wilt just one. NO comparison.

Overall, the Lakers have won 14 titles and Boston 16. The next top team, the 76'ers, have won three!



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A total of 30 championships between them. Thus, one of these two giants will win, making it 31 combined titles in the league's 61 seasons!

The NBA was officially formed in 1949, when the Basketball Association of America merged with the National Basketball League. Thus, in their 60 years of existence, these two teams have combined to win just over half of all titles.

And, the numbers become more amazing.

The Lakers have appeared in the finals 30 times, the Celtics, 19, thus one of these two teams has appeared 49 times out of 61! Dominance does not even begin to describe these staggering numbers!

I can't remember any other sport where two teams were so above and beyond the others for such a continuous length of time.

Back to the present, LA has beyond a doubt the best player in the league in Kobe Bryant.

As one Western Conference coach said, "It's not even close. The difference between Kobe and LaBron (James) is like a Maserati and a Volvo."

I compare Kobe to Jerry Rice and Tiger Woods. Each is/was obsessed with perfection, and each worked harder than any other to stay the best.

Charles Barkley said after LA beat the Spurs Wednesday night, "...well, the Lakers have that nuclear weapon, (Kobe), so..." and he went on to say, "finally, I do have to compare him to Jordan, he's that good."

Sports Illustrated, on their web site and in a recent issue, has a feature story on Kobe and his near total obsession with being the best. And at times, the story is not flattering, but all individual sources admit that to be the best, you sometimes piss people off.

His incredible heroics and game winning actions speak for themselves.

In closing out the Spurs Wednesday night, Kobe took over the game, scoring 27 of his 39 points in the 2nd half, 19 in the 4th quarter.

Kobe never really softens his competitive edge. He is the same, smirking, all-out player in the biggest of games and the lightest of practices.

From the time he was in the 8th grade, he would jump all over teammates for even the smallest mistake. He would force other teammates to practice for hours on end, sometimes playing one on one to 100.

He is often in the gym at 5 am and still there at 7pm.

His off-season work-out regimen is as extensive as that of Jerry Rice.

Six hours a day, six days a week.

Even in conversations, Bryant's obsession comes out.

"Kobe wants it so badly that he rubs an awful lot of people the wrong way," say Lakers consultant Tex Winter, the guru of the triangle offense.

A scout said, "there may be 8-10 players in the league with more pure athleticism than Kobe, but no one uses his as well. His focus is unreal. There's a difference between loving and liking basketball, and Kobe not only loves it, he lives it.

"Of the maybe 30 players in the NBA who love it, they do so when the lights come on. Kobe loves doing the s..t before the lights come on."

One year, Kobe asked his temporary coach, Greg Popovich, to put on one of his infamous four-hour "hell" practices. And this was for the All-Star game!

SI says this freakish compulsion may be the hardest element of the game to quantify. There are no finite stats to measure a player's ruthlessness, that desire to not just beat, but crush his opponent so badly they'll need therapy to recover.

This fanaticism, or whatever you call it, it can't be taught. You just have it, says one coach.



Several other coaches, GM's and scouts name a few players who have similar drive, but collectively, they say none of those stars "are anywhere near being in Kobe's league."

Even with many players disliking him, an SI poll showed 35% of other players said he was the one they feared the most. The second player was at 9%.

Teammates say he even spends hours on doing such tiny things as how to foul opponents without the refs seeing it, such as simply turning his hand so the back of it, not the palm, pushes against the opponents, thus the ref sees nothing.

Idan Ravin, a personal trainer to many NBA stars, says this type of killer instinct is composed of love of the game, ambition – to be the best, EVER, obsessive-compulsive behavior, arrogance, selfishness and totally guiltless.

He says, "Kobe has all of them, in abundance."

"He (Kobe) admits he is a ruthless s.o.b. He often says why pass up an opportunity, why pass to another player who doesn't work as hard, who doesn't want it so bad you would kill for it."

Thus you can see why a number of fans, and some players are turned off by Kobe.

But each and every one of those players will admit, that he IS the best, and they do not relish having to play against him.

Getting back to the moment and the comparison to the 80's.

Now, Boston has Kevin Garnett as their marquee player, and they have two other All-Stars in Paul Pierce and Ray Allen.

While both teams are good on both sides of the ball, Boston is more defensive oriented and the Lakers offensive.

You know the networks are praying for this match-up.

Let's take a quick look at those incredible 80's.

In 1979-80, Magic's rookie year, they played the 76'ers. With the Lakers up 3-2, game 6 was in Philly, but Kareem was at home in LA with his badly sprained ankle resting on a stool. Magic started at CENTER and eventually played every position. He scored 42 points, had 15 rebounds, 7 assists and 5 steals, clinching the title. He was MVP.

No other player in NBA history has ever played all positions in one game before. Nor since.

Boston defeated Houston in '81, LA beat Philly in '82 and Philly turned the tables in '83, beating LA.

In the first of the Magic-Bird, mega-match-ups in '84, Boston beat LA in 7, with Bird winning MVP. Bird scored 41 points in game 7, Magic 39. This was the most watched NBA game ever. A rematch in '85 saw LA turn the tables, beating Boston in 6, even though Boston had the home court advantage, with a regular season 63-19 record, Lakers at 62-20. Kareem was the MVP.

This game saw 9 future hall-of-famers playing.

1986 saw Boston defeat Houston, 4 games to 2, with Bird again being the MVP.

In 1987, LA and Boston met again, this being the 10th time these two teams had met in the finals, by far the most in finals match-ups.

LA won, 4 games to two, and the "magic moment" came in game 4 with Magic doing his best Kareem imitation with his own "junior" sky hook with 7 seconds left to win the game.

In '88, LA beat Detroit but the Pistons turned the tables in '89, sweeping LA.

During the 80's rivalry, each team fielded many hall-of-famers.

LA had Kareem, Magic, James Worthy, Bob McAdoo (3 seasons) as well as Kurt Rambis, Michael Cooper and current Hornets' coach Byron Scott.

Boston had Bird, McHale, Robert Parish and Danny Ainge, among others.

Going way back to the 50's and 60's, the Celtics were led by Bill Russell, and accompanied by the likes of Bob Cousy, KC Jones, Sam Jones, Tom Heinsohn and John Havlicek.

During one stretch, Boston won 8 consecutive titles, from 59-66.



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So, I, for one, am glad it's Boston-LA. Again, one more time!

And I truly believe Kobe would mortgage his soul to win. He so wants to do so without his former side-kick – a very big side-kick, Shaq.

A lot of history will be remembered if these two teams meet.

And, in honor for “the best,” I will break out one of my best. An 18-year old bottle of LaGavullen single malt. At \$190 per, it will be worth it.

“Play it again, Sam.”