

NBA PLAYOFFS

The

is now

The Lakers have endured a rocky regular season and face an uncertain offseason. To accomplish their goal of a championship, they must forget it all and focus on the present. BY SEAN DEVENNEY

In the goofy media caricature of Phil Jackson, forged over 14 seasons and nine championships, the Lakers coach is a Zen master, a purveyor of equal parts tranquility and triangle offense, of inner peace and interior defense. The label does not quite fit, of course—he's a bit overdressed for the monkish life, and how many Zen masters shill for American Express on the side?—but given Jackson's impeccable approach to the psychology of running a basketball team, he's the closest thing the NBA coaching fraternity has to an enlightened member. Consider the advice Jackson has given his Lakers in the days before the postseason, a span in which the Lakers will either secure their greatness or gain a spot as one of the all-time disappointments in sports. Live in the now, Jackson has been telling his players. That happens to be the literal translation of the word "Zen."

"He wanted us to just focus on what we could control, which was the games we were playing," says Lakers guard Kareem Rush. "So he says things like, 'Enjoy now.'"

There's little wonder why Jackson is emphasizing the now for his team. It's probable that never in league history has a team endured a recent past so rife with discord and misfortune, all while facing a future that threatens to tear the team asunder. With that backdrop, the now is the Lakers' only haven.

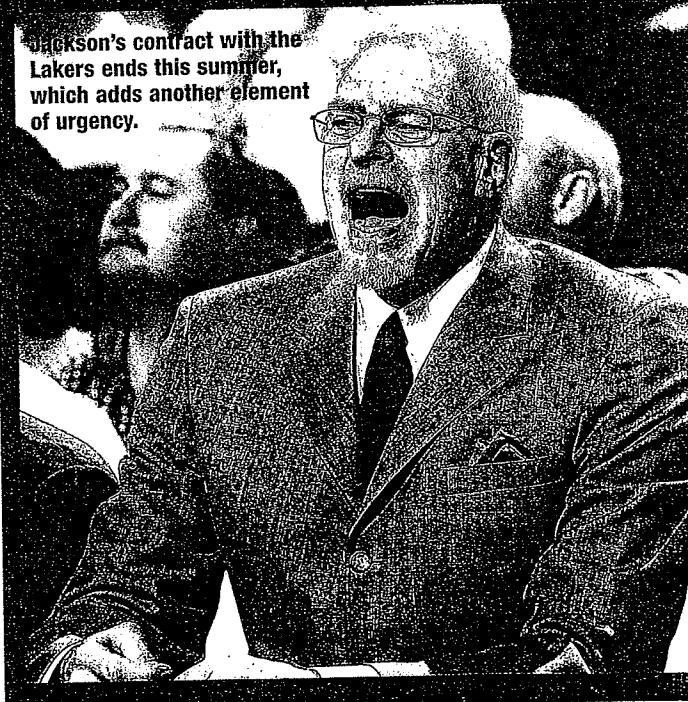
Seven months ago, when training camp began in Hawaii, the team seemed invincible. The duo of Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant, which already had led the Lakers to three championships, was joined by future Hall of Famers Karl Malone and Gary Payton, giving L.A., arguably, the greatest collection of four players ever assembled on one NBA team. Golden State general manager Garry St. Jean,

whose team was the Lakers' sparring partner in Hawaii, says, "I remember watching them warm up and thinking, 'This is incredible.' I knew what they had on paper, but watching them all on the same court, it was like something you'd dream up."

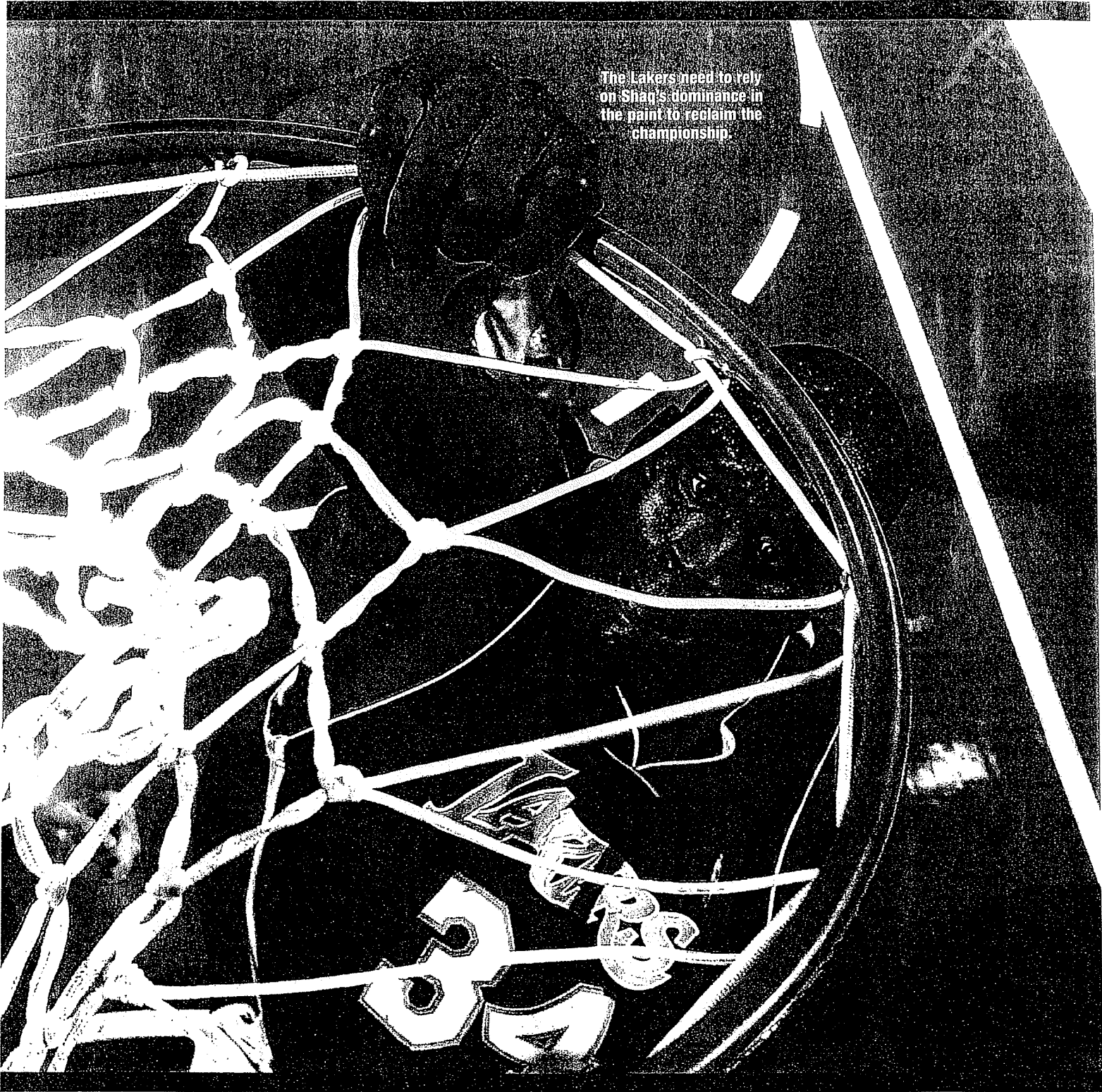
The dream season did not last. The checklist of the Lakers' troubles is long. The standing feud between O'Neal and Bryant became very ugly, and very public, even before the season started. The futures of O'Neal (he wants a contract extension) and Bryant (he can be a free agent this summer) are uncertain. Bryant essentially admitted that he does not much like Jackson, threw in a shot at O'Neal when he was outplayed by Rockets center Yao Ming and, all the while, has stood as a defendant in an Eagle, Colo., rape case. Both O'Neal (calf, knee) and Bryant (finger, shoulder, knee) have missed time with injuries.

If problems were limited to O'Neal and Bryant, this would be just another ho-hum season in Lakerland. But there's more. Malone's mother died during the offseason. Then Malone suffered a knee

Jackson's contract with the Lakers ends this summer, which adds another element of urgency.



injury that kept him out of 40 games, the first major injury of his 19-year career. By midseason, Payton chafed under the confines of the triangle and let out at Jackson for limiting his minutes. Jackson, is facing the unknown—his contract negotiations broke down two months ago and, with no deal in place, he might retire. Heck, even Rick Fox, Vladimir Medvedenko and Derek Fisher have issues. Malone might retire, and the other two are free agents.



The Lakers need to rely on Shaq's dominance in the paint to reclaim the championship.

only players sure to return next season are O'Neal, Rush, Devean George, Brian Cook and Luke Walton.

This was a critical season for the Lakers, and, generally, things did not go well. The offseason will be just as important, perhaps the most important in franchise history.

But for now, there is ... well, there is *now*. Jackson, as is his custom, has the Lakers playing much better in the season's second half, including a

surge of 11 consecutive wins in which the Lakers moved the ball, scored and defended to their potential. That's Jackson's style. He even seems to enjoy controversy—Jackson coached without a long-term contract in his last three seasons with the Bulls, and he says he prefers it that way. When the playoff stretch comes, though, Jackson's Lakers always are ready. In his five seasons as Los Angeles coach, Jackson has a .655 winning percentage in the first

half; his winning percentage jumps to .773 after the All-Star break.

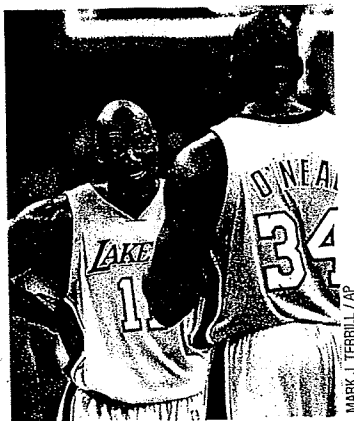
"I think he likes to let some things go on, and let us work them out," says Fox. "It works."

When it comes to the championship, the Lakers are not the lock they seemed to be before the season, though the oddsmakers have made them the favorites. The Lakers are just one of 16 playoff teams trying to phase out the tribulations and tumults of

the 82-game regular season, one of 16 looking to seize control of the now. Realistically, there are six teams that can win the championship—the Lakers, Kings, Spurs, Timberwolves, Pistons and Pacers (apologies to the Nets and Mavericks)—and, coupling their talent with their inconsistency, it's impossible to say where the Lakers stack up.

What is certain is that none of those teams is more captivating than the Lakers, none has the depth and variety of subplots, or the troubles to overcome.

"It's hard to say what is going to happen," Rush says. "But it probably is going to be fun. And it definitely is going to be interesting."



O'Neal credits Malone (left) for assuming a leadership role.

MARK J. TERRILL / AP

Jackson is not alone in his stewardship of the Lakers—in an odd way, his sometimes-esoteric musings are counterbalanced by the down-home wisdom of Malone, who, at 40, is the league's second-oldest active player and perhaps its most respected. When O'Neal calls Malone (with Payton) "the soul" of the Lakers, he's getting it only half right. Malone is also the conscience. He joined the team this summer after taking a nearly \$18 million pay cut, solely because he wanted to win a championship, and Malone has displayed little patience for the internal problems that threaten that goal. A chance to win a championship, as he sees it, is a privilege too many of his teammates don't value enough. He doesn't use Jackson's abstract language, but the message is the same—the Lakers must put aside distractions, and focus on now.

"I came here to win, and with the talent we have, there is no reason we should not do that," Malone says. "I don't think that there is a team out there that has been through what we've been through all year, constantly. But we should be fine. There is no reason we should play beneath ourselves."

Yet, the Lakers often do, though they do it much less when Malone is on the floor. The Lakers often fall into lax defense, poor communication and the habit of perimeter players—especially Bryant—who ignore the interior offense Malone and O'Neal can provide. And locker room squabbles? "I don't understand that stuff," Malone says.

With Malone healthy, the Lakers have gone 30-8 this season, and the effect his passing, rebounding and work ethic has on teammates is palpable. "I don't think many people understood the importance of Karl Malone," Blazers coach Maurice Cheeks says. "When he was out, they were saying he is old and this type of thing. But once he comes back, you see how he solidifies the defense, the way he passes the ball on the offensive end. I don't think people understood how much they missed him. He doesn't take any excuses, and that keeps those guys in order."

But even with Malone back in the lineup, the Lakers' postseason fortunes are hard to gauge. There are tangible concerns. O'Neal's right knee has some

tendinitis, his offensive numbers have taken a nosedive and he has been sullen lately. Of course, O'Neal usually excels when he's angry, but concern about his knee is high. Bryant has court dates in Colorado from April 26-28, which will land in the middle of the first round. He also has dates May 10-14, which figure to be in the middle of the conference semifinals. That schedule drew a definitive response from Jackson: "Ouch."

When the Lakers' top players are on the floor, the strategy for beating L.A. has not changed. But the addition of Malone and Payton means teams hoping to

knock off the Lakers must be more precise and consistent. The blueprint:

- Run high pick-and-rolls effectively, with big men who can hit midrange jumpers, to take advantage of O'Neal's leaden feet and draw him away from the basket. After back-to-back losses in which San Antonio and Portland hammered the Lakers with pick-and-rolls, Malone said, "Sometimes it seems like we've never seen a pick-and-roll before."

- Use speed at point guard, to wear down Payton and beat him into the paint, where the Lakers are vulnerable. Payton still is a smart and effective defender, but he is no longer an agile one. Fast point guards give him fits, and could force Jackson to use Bryant to guard the point.

- Get into transition, because the Lakers are almost always slow to get back defensively. Easy fast-break baskets are available.

- Put a lockdown perimeter defender on Bryant. Of course, not all teams have a lockdown perimeter defender, but those that do can frustrate Bryant, and get him to do too much. That draws him out of the offense and causes irritation among his teammates and coaches. "If you can frustrate him early and get a hand in his face," says Spurs small forward Bruce Bowen, "you can hope to get him out of his game."

That blueprint, however, can be useless if the Lakers are focused and determined—if they're playing in Jackson's "now." "When they're on all cylinders," says Sonics general manager Rick Sund, "it's hard to see a team beating them in a seven-game series. No one knows how to get a team ready for the playoffs like Phil Jackson, and he seems to be doing it again."

Before the season, Payton said, "We're either going to win a championship or have to blame ourselves," the implication being that the title is theirs to lose, that only a flood of internal problems could knock the Lakers off course. Certainly, that flood of problems hit the Lakers this season, and threatens to break up the team in the offseason. Whether they are resilient enough to withstand the past and forget the future will be determined by these playoffs. This could be a championship team, or a fantastic failure. That will be determined by the now. **TSN**

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Here and now

You don't have to be wearing the purple-and-gold to benefit from some spiritual advice. As the playoffs open, there are players around the league who could stand to tune out the past and the future, and live in the now that the postseason offers.

Wally Szczerbiak, Timberwolves.

When Szczerbiak was sitting out with a foot injury, the Timberwolves were 38-15. Szczerbiak's replacements, Fred Hoiberg and Trenton Hassell, focused on their respective roles—for Hassell, it was defense; for Hoiberg, it was ball movement and hitting open 3s. But the return of Szczerbiak (as well as Troy Hudson and Michael Olowokandi), disrupted the team's chemistry, and an 11-9 run followed. Szczerbiak has played better lately, and the team is winning, but there is talk that Minnesota will look to deal him in the offseason.

Chris Webber, Kings. Webber is in the same boat as Szczerbiak—an All-Star player whose team played better while he was injured. Webber, who blew out his knee in the playoffs last year, has been booed in his return to the Kings' lineup. He has lost mobility, hurting his shooting and defense.

Lawrence Frank, Nets. There is a lot to tune out for Frank, but he has been unflappable thus far. He still does not have a contract for next season, and the standard in New Jersey has been set pretty high—the Nets have been to The Finals two straight years, after all, and they still fired Byron Scott. If they flop in the postseason (and with Jason Kidd and Kenyon Martin nursing injuries, it's likely they will), the Nets might not make Frank's job permanent.

Reggie Miller, Pacers. Miller's postseason performance last season was brutal. He shot 28.3 percent, and his bricklaying was one of the main reasons the Pacers were bounced in the first round. The Pacers don't need Miller to be the player he was in 1995, but they need his ability to make clutch shots. That disappeared last year. If he does not show up again, the Pacers could have a disappointing finish again—and talk about Miller being finished will heat up.

Don Nelson, Mavericks. With their lack of interior defense and their struggles in the halfcourt, the Mavericks are a good candidate for an early playoff exit, which would be bad news for Nelson. If owner Mark Cuban thinks that Nelson has taken the Mavs as far as he can, Cuban could go looking for a new voice in the locker room. This postseason could be make-or-break for Nelson (as usual), and considering Dallas went to the conference finals last season, it's hard to imagine the team improving on last year's playoff performance. —S.D.

THE TIME IN NOW

1. HOW MANY NBA CHAMPIONSHIPS HAS PHIL JACKSON WON?

2. WHO ARE THE TWO NEW PLAYERS THE LAKERS PICKUPED UP THIS YEAR?

3. JACKSON HAS A CONTRACT FOR NEXT YEAR WITH THE LAKERS. TRUE OR FALSE

4. WHAT IS JACKSON'S WINNING % FOR THE FIRST HALF OF THE SEASON?

5. WITH KARL MALONE IN THE LINEUP WHAT IS THE LAKERS RECORD?

6. LAKERS HAVE TROUBLE DEFENDING THE PICK AND ROLL. TRUE OR FALSE

7. THE LAKERS ARE VERY GOOD IN TRANSITION. THEY NEVER GIVE UP FAST BREAKS. TRUE OR FALSE.

8. WHAT IS THE LAKERS WINNING % IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE SEASON?

9. KOBE BRYANT IS A FREE AGENT AT THE END OF THE SEASON. TRUE OR FALSE

10. KOBE IS A DEFENDANT IN A RAPE CASE IN SYRACUSE, N.Y. TRUE OR FALSE