

70

Fired Up

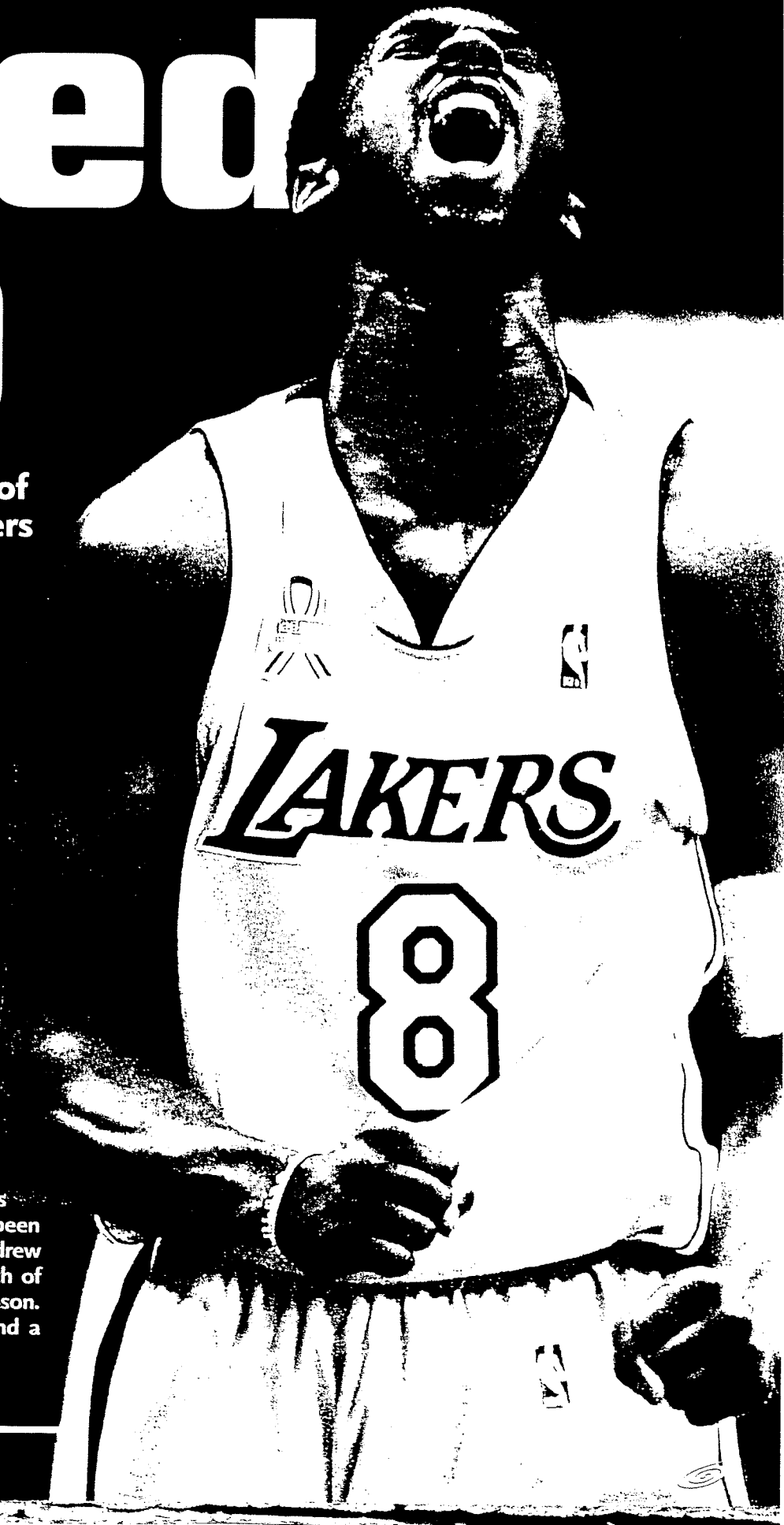
The superstar guard of the Los Angeles Lakers is burning brighter than ever. Here are 13 reasons why.

1 All-around Consistency
Kobe has put up All-Star numbers for the Lakers in each of the past four NBA seasons, and he's still sizzling this season — all over the court. As of April 4, the 23-year-old guard was second on the team in scoring (25.5 points per game) and first in assists (5.6) and steals (1.51). "Right now, I'm comfortable where my game is," he says. Comfortable? Most players can only dream of numbers like those.

2. Revved-up Intensity
Kobe has always kept his cool on the court. This season, though, he's playing with more emotion. He has been jawing with refs and opponents. He drew six technical fouls in the first month of 2001-02, more than he had all last season. "Certain nights, you have to send a

BIG SHOTS

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK J. TERRILL/AP



message that 'I'm a good player and if you challenge me, I'm going to come right back at you.'" says Laker assistant coach Jim Cleamons.

Kobe sent that message to guard Reggie Miller of the Indiana Pacers in a game last March 1. The two players got into a fistfight and were suspended for two games.

"I've asked him to dial it down another degree," says Laker coach Phil Jackson. "We want aggressive but not belligerent."

3. Enough "Who's the Man?"

For most of last season, Kobe and Laker center Shaquille O'Neal squabbled about who was "The Man" on the team. But they ironed out their differences toward the end of the regular season and praised each other as they hoisted the team's second straight NBA championship trophy.

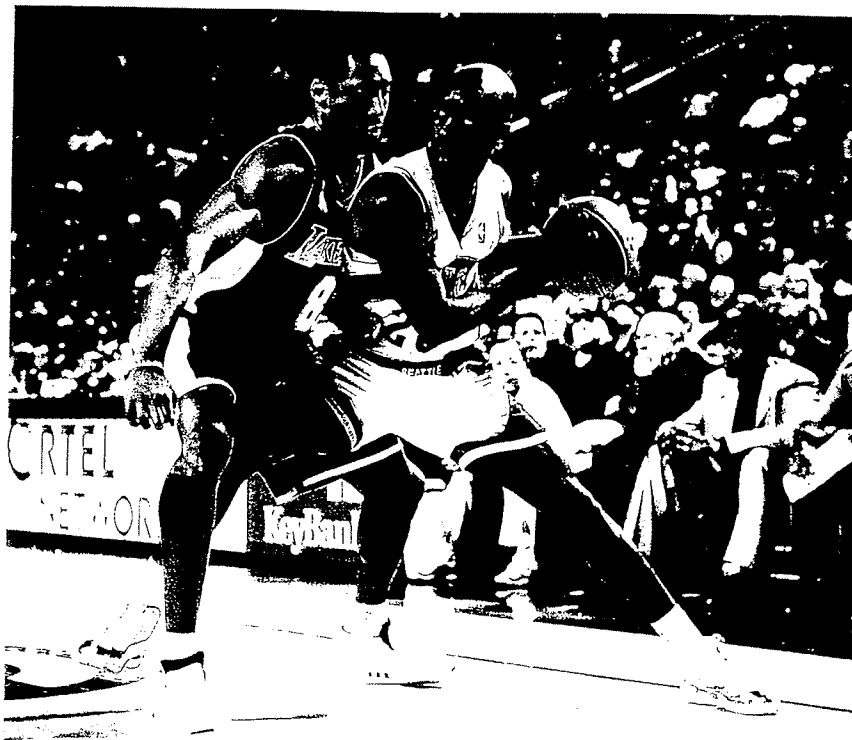
This season, the lovefest continues. During Kobe's two-game suspension in March, Shaq wore his teammate's jersey at a pre-game warm-up.

"I was happy about it," says Kobe. "It showed a lot of support."

4. Picks Up Slack for Shaq

Shaq and Kobe have discovered there's enough room on the court for both of them. But when Shaq isn't in the lineup, Kobe has no problem carrying the team. He took care of the offensive load on January 14, 2002, when the Lakers played the Memphis Grizzlies and Shaq was serving a three-game suspension. Kobe knocked down a career-high 56 points in just 34 minutes. As of April 4, it was the highest single-game point total in the NBA this season and tied Kobe for 10th on the Lakers' all-time list.

"[My teammates] were cheering



Kobe's tight D has earned him NBA All-Defensive team honors.

me on," said Kobe after the game. "It just made things fun."

5. Class of the H.S. Kids

The standard Kobe has set for high-schoolers who jump to the pros will be tough to top. His 56-point game was the highest single-game total among the 19 players who have been drafted out of high school. Kobe's 19.8-point career scoring average as of April 4 was the highest among the 16 high school players drafted since 1995. He was ahead of Kevin Garnett (18.9), Tracy McGrady (17.6), and Jermaine O'Neal (8.4).

6. Tough on D, Too

Kobe has also become one of the league's toughest defenders. In 1999-00, he became the youngest player named to the NBA All-Defensive Team. He made the team again in 2000-01.

"When Kobe focuses in, he's a good defensive player," says assistant coach Cleamons. "When he decides he's not going to give any player anything, he will be the best."

7. Showstopping Moves

Kobe loves to perform, and fans have come to expect his nightly

"Right now, I'm comfortable where my game is," says 23-year-old Kobe.

above-the-rim acrobatics. He used his flair in the air to win the slam-dunk contest during the 1997 All-Star Weekend.

Kobe first dunked when he was 14. "I couldn't stop dunking after that," he says. "I was dunking every chance I got."

8. Beyond Expectations

The Charlotte Hornets selected Kobe with the 13th pick in the 1996 NBA draft. Less than a month later, he was traded to the Lakers for center Vlade Divac.

Who was drafted before Kobe? Allen Iverson, Marcus Camby, Shareef Abdur-Rahim, Stephon Marbury, and Ray Allen were among the top picks.

Only two of those five players have been in the NBA Finals: Allen (2000-01, with the Philadelphia 76ers) and Marcus (1998-99, with the New York Knicks). Kobe, of course, has won two titles so far (1999-00, 2000-01).

9. Game Study

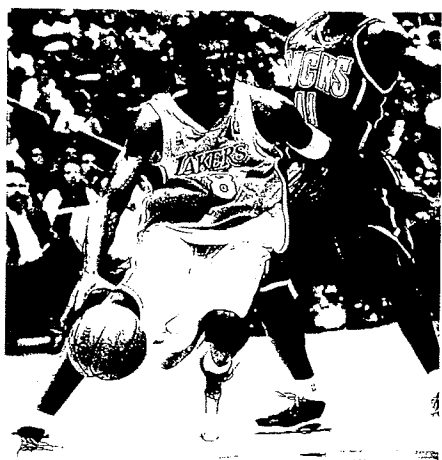
Kobe's dad, Joe, played pro hoops in Italy, and Kobe lived there from first grade through eighth grade. It was a tough adjustment because he had to learn to speak Italian. His friends were into soccer, so basketball became his private hobby.

"After school, I would be the only guy on the court, working on my moves. Then kids would start showing up with their soccer ball," he says.

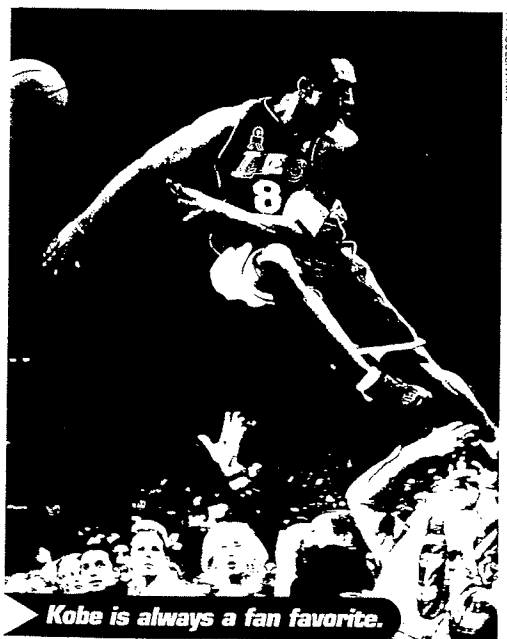
Kobe's grandparents sent him videotapes of NBA games. He'd



Brandy was his prom date.



Open floor? Look out: 2 points.



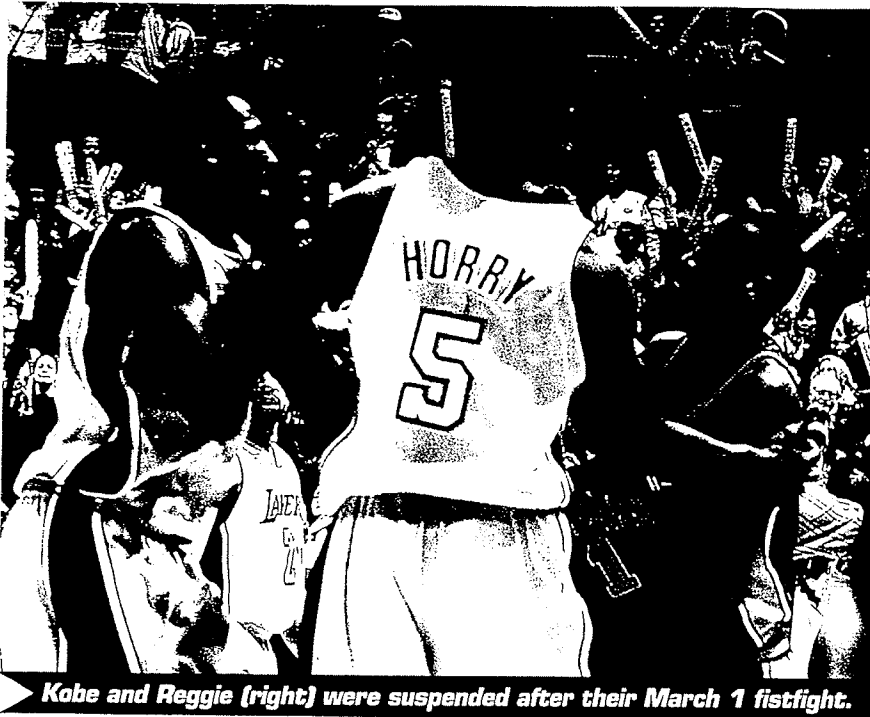
Kobe is always a fan favorite.

KOBE'S FAVORITE STUFF

Athletes I Most Admired When I Was a Kid	Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Michael Jordan, Muhammad Ali, and Jackie Robinson
TV Show	<i>106 and Park</i> (Music show)
Movie	<i>The Godfather</i>
Food	Tacos
Actor	Denzel Washington
Actress	Halle Berry
Comic Book Hero	Batman
Pre-game Meal	Bacon cheeseburger with a vanilla milkshake
Color	Gold
Musician	Jay-Z
Birthday Present I Ever Received	"My first basketball, when I was about five. It was the official [NBA] leather basketball."

MAGIC JOHNSON: CHRIS MATTHEWZAP; THE GODFATHER: THE EVERETT COLLECTION; BATMAN: THE EVERETT COLLECTION; GOLD BARS: PHOTOGRAPHY; JAY-Z: SIZANNE PHILIPETIAN

**POSTER
INSIDE!**



CHRIS CANTON/SHAWMANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Kobe and Reggie (right) were suspended after their March 1 fistfight.

He wrote or co-wrote all of the songs. On one of them, he performed a duet with model Tyra Banks.

12. All-time Credentials

In Kobe and Shaq's first five seasons together, 1996-97 to 2000-01, Kobe had 18.5 points per game and Shaq averaged 28.1. The Lakers' winning percentage for those seasons was 71.7 percent. Those stats top the numbers racked up by two former Laker greats in *their* first half decade together. From 1979-80 through 1983-84, guard Earvin "Magic" Johnson had 18.2 points per game and center Kareem Abdul-Jabbar averaged 23.6 points. The team's winning percentage was 69 percent.

watch the tapes and then head outside alone to practice the moves of the NBA stars he'd just seen.

10. Maybe It's the Shoes

After the September 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., Adidas created a stars-and-stripes version of the

KobeTwo sneaker just for Kobe. He wore them for the first Laker game of 2001-02 and finished with 29 points, 7 rebounds, 4 assists, and 3 steals.

11. That Hollywood Flair

Kobe has always been drawn to the spotlight. In 1996, his date for the senior prom at Lower Merion High School, in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, was pop singer and actress Brandy. He played a basketball player on an episode of *Moesha*, her TV show.

In 2000, Kobe recorded a hip-hop CD, though it was never released.

13. He's on a Mission

Kobe is determined to help make the Lakers the fifth team in NBA history to win the championship at least three times in a row. As of April 4, their 53-22 record was the second-best in the NBA.

How badly does Kobe want that third championship?

"Just as badly as I wanted to win the first two," he says. "It would mean being on top again." ●



DAN LOHMEYER

2002 All-Star MVP

Kobe's Stats

LOS ANGELES LAKERS

Season	Games	Points		Assists	Steals
		Totals	Average		
1996-97	71	539	7.6	1.3	.69
1997-98	79	1,220	15.4	2.5	.94
1998-99	50	996	19.9	3.8	1.44
1999-00	66	1,485	22.5	4.9	1.61
2000-01	68	1,938	28.5	5.0	1.68
TOTALS	334	6,178	18.5	3.4	1.24

1. Why does Kobe have All-around consistency?
2. Why has Kobe drawn more technical fouls then previous years?
3. Which team did Kobe score 56 points against?
4. Kobe was the youngest player to receive what award?
5. Kobe won the slam dunk contest at the all star game, how old was he the first time he dunked a basketball?
6. Which team first drafted Kobe?
7. Why did basketball become Kobe's private hobby?
8. When Kobe practiced his moves, he did so like the NBA stars. How did Kobe know what the NBA moves were?
9. Why was pop singer Brandy, Kobe's date for the senior prom?
10. In what year did Kobe receive the all-star MVP award?