

Team 'tude

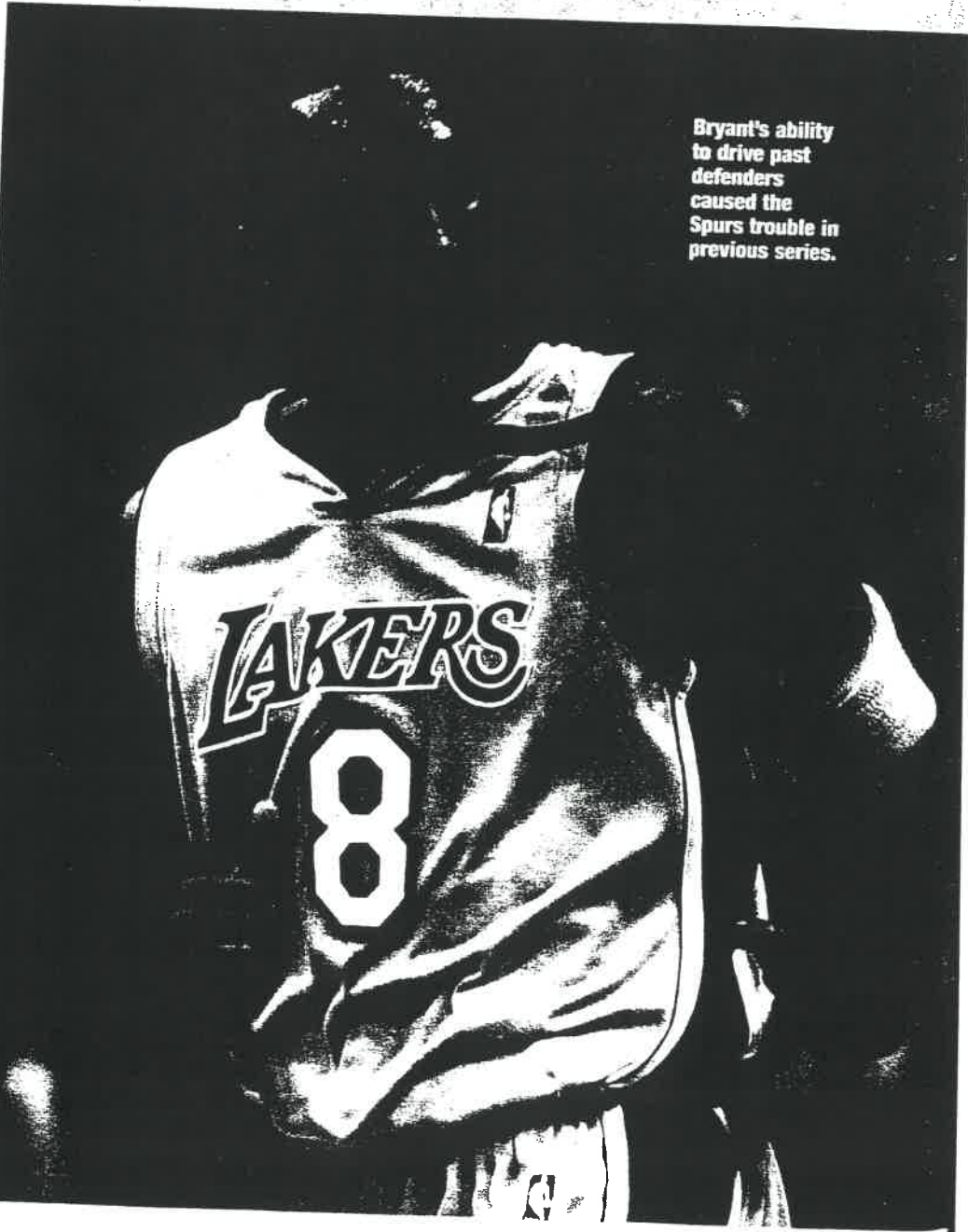
The Lakers might not be as good as they were the past three seasons, but they have rediscovered a swagger the Spurs know all too well

BY SEAN DEVENEY

It was not until Game 5 of the first round of these NBA playoffs that Lakers coach Phil Jackson finally saw something that made him comfortable. The first four games of the post-season trek seemed to follow no script, at least not one familiar to Tinseltown's team. In those games, Minnesota used the two magic beans associated with beating the Lakers—fullcourt pressure defense to disrupt the triangle offense, and pick-and-roll offense to fluster point guard Derek Fisher and draw behemoth center Shaquille O'Neal out of his comfort zone—to render the three-time defending champs into some unfamiliar group of rump. Sassy small forward Rick Fox was injured, superstar Kobe Bryant looked human, marksman Robert Horry was markless, O'Neal was not being dribbled the ball, and Jackson was using pinesmen Tim Lincecum and Jannero Pargo for meaningful minutes. It was enough to make a coach wonder, "Who on earth are these guys?"

During a sports year in which the Anaheim Angels, Ohio State Buckeyes, Syracuse Orangemen and Tampa Bay Buccaneers have won long-shot championships, certainly it seemed that the Lakers were preparing to let go of their chokehold on the Larry Bird trophy and make room for a new surprise champ. But then O'Neal scored six straight points near the end of the first half of Game 5. Then the Timberwolves, worn down from the energy required for pressure defense and incessant pick-and-rolls, collapsed. Then the Lakers won by 30, and there was Jackson after the game, beaming. The script was back in order. "That team, I recognize," he said.

That is bad news for all those upset hopefuls who had tied their title fortunes to the possibility of this not being the Lakers' year. That includes L.A.'s current opponents, the league's best regular-season team, the Spurs. San Antonio entered the series with the confidence of having swept the Lakers in the regular season but with the knowledge that the Lakers of November through April are not the Lakers of May. "Everyone should know by now," says Lakers guard Brian Shaw, "that what happens in the regular doesn't affect us in the playoffs." The one thing that boosts the Lakers in the post-season is the one thing the Timberwolves were able to judge aside early in the first round, before they



Bryant's ability to drive past defenders caused the Spurs trouble in previous series.

KIM D. JOHNSON / AP



tip for success: Give me the ball.

aten in Games 4, 5 and 6—the Lakers' able attitude. Minnesota's success did not, though, and as L.A. prepared for a second-atchup against a team they had turned into rsonal postseason pinata in the past two was clear that the Lakers were walking that l walk and talking that same old talk. As oted, "We definitely have our swagger back." e swagger. No team carries it the way the o, and no team, aside from the Trail Blazers, on the business side of that 'tude more Spurs. In the lopsided history of this recent ivalry, the Lakers' swagger has been enough he Spurs cowering. San Antonio entered the h eight playoff losses in the last nine games he Lakers and managed to come up with feats in a wide range of ways—last year, the ouble-digit lead in the fourth quarter was red method; two years ago, it was roll-over 39 and 29 points. As this year's series got ay, the big question loomed: Would San ind a new way to lose to the Lakers? matter who they are playing," says olves coach Flip Saunders of the Lakers, got the mental edge. For them, it is 'been ne that.' That is what experience is. There stitute for experience. They have it more ne."

The Spurs can offer Duncan more help than in recent seasons.



Malone alone

It came in typical John Stockton fashion, without a press conference, without hype or self-indulgence. He simply looked at a group of reporters and said, vaguely, "I think I am finished." Er, you mean, you're retiring, John? "Something like that, yeah," he responded.

With that, the inevitable descent into the unknown began for the Jazz, a team that has been led by Stockton and Karl Malone for 18 years but has been bounced from the playoffs in the first round the last three seasons. As owner Larry Miller told TSN Radio, "That put us on a track where we knew we had to go into that dreaded rebuilding, because half of that dynamic duo has decided to hang them up."

What happens with the duo's other half still is undecided. Malone is a free agent, and there are three factors in play regarding what he will do next. First, there is the shot at a championship ring. Second is Malone's chance to break Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's scoring record of 38,387 points; Malone is 2,013 points behind. Third, is lifestyle: Malone is a country guy by admission and probably wants to avoid the big city. He also must consider what level contract he can command at his age. Unless there is a sign-and-trade, Malone will be looking at a deal starting at \$4.5 million. Pooling those factors, six teams emerge as possible destinations for Malone.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN



JAZZ

Positive: He could close out his career with the team he helped build and can get a good contract. He'd be assured of the scoring record.
Negative: No chance for a ring.



KINGS

Positive: Sacramento has plenty to offer the Jazz, and Malone would have an excellent shot at a championship.
Negative: He'd be backing up Chris Webber, so kiss the scoring record goodbye.



LAKERS

Positive: The best chance for a ring is in L.A. Malone could score 12 to 15 points per night, meaning he'd hit the record in less than two seasons.
Negative: Los Angeles is not a Malone kind of town. There is not enough on the roster to work a sign-and-trade with the Jazz, and the Lakers are only mildly interested.



MAVERICKS

Positive: It's in the heart of rodeo country. The Mavs could work a sign-and-trade for Malone, with a third team involved. Owner Mark Cuban wanted Malone before.
Negative: A championship is certainly no guarantee. In Dallas, Malone would be the fourth option and, thus, would not score enough to break the record.



SPURS

Positive: Again, it's Texas, and the Spurs have acres of cap space.
Negative: Malone is too old for the Spurs' rebuilding project; they would prefer someone such as Jermaine O'Neal.



TIMBERWOLVES

Positive: Another good location, and a front line of Malone, Kevin Garnett and Rasha Nesterovic would put Minnesota among the league's elite. He would break the scoring record.
Negative: There's not much to offer in trade, and a title would be uncertain. —S.D.

Only with a team as overwhelmingly confident as the Lakers can the loss of a starter be seen as a positive. When Fox went down with a torn tendon in his left foot in the fourth game of the Minnesota series, the team rallied. "We're a tough team to motivate," Horry says. "You hate to see Rick get hurt, but I think once he went down, it woke up everybody. That's motivation."

The loss of Fox, though, highlights something we've known about this group of Lakers ever since that 11-19 start in the regular season: They're just not as good as the teams that won the last three titles. If they've got swagger about them, then they're going to need it. They'll need any edge—mental, physical, supernatural—they can get. Without Fox, Devean George, whose progress this season has been marginal, lands in the starting lineup. That means Jackson will use 37-year-old Shaw as the sixth man. Power forward Mark Madsen gets a handful of regular minutes, but the bench does not extend much beyond that. It has been said that the Lakers could win a championship with O'Neal, Bryant and three chubby chuckers from the YMCA Sunday-night league. As the second round opened, it seemed L.A. was preparing to put that theory to the test.

Despite the playoff drubbings they've received at the hands of the Lakers, the Spurs came into Round 2 of the postseason with the feeling things would be different this time. Certainly, they could not get worse, and besides, these are not the same, old Spurs. Typically, the Spurs have been solid but predictable defensively (they've been powerless against a top-notch penetrator such as Bryant) and even more predictable offensively (throw it to Tim Duncan; see what happens). But this team is more versatile than the versions the Lakers dismantled the past two postseasons, when the Spurs were lacking in high-energy players and effective ballhandlers. "We just passed it to Timmy and had no answer," second-year point guard Tony Parker told reporters. "This year, I feel like we have a lot of people who can hit shots at the end of games. We have a lot more weapons."

Two years ago, an injury to shooting guard Derek Anderson took the Spurs' offense. Last year, they had Parker, but he was a rookie limited by his inexperience and by the team's lack of players who could keep up with him. Now, the Spurs have four zig-zaggers in their rotation for the Lakers to chase—Parker, Stephen Jackson, Eddy Claxton and rookie Manu Ginobili. Just as the Timberwolves' Troy Hudson riddled the Lakers with his energy and scoring as the ballhandler on

pick-and-rolls in Round 1, the Spurs will attack the Lakers with their little guys. But unlike Hudson, who was forced to be a one-man perimeter show for the Timberwolves, the Spurs feature a fleet of four non-stop perimeter hummingbirds.

What's more, these new guys are not easily spooked. Why should they be? The Lakers are a challenge, for sure, but San Antonio's young guns are not unfamiliar with challenges. Parker is only 20 but has been playing pro ball since he was 15. Ginobili, 25, has been a pro since he was 20 and was the top play-

er in Europe before coming to the Spurs. Claxton, 25, has battled his way back onto the court despite a troublesome knee that forced him to sit out his rookie year. And Jackson (25) has been hardened by stints in the CBA and the Venezuela bush leagues.

"Talent-wise, the Spurs should flat out beat the Lakers," says a Western Conference scout. "There's no depth on the Lakers, and Minnesota kind of showed that if you keep the pressure on them on both ends (of the floor), you can throw

them off and beat them. But that's on paper. On the floor, it always seems to go the Lakers' way, doesn't it? They just know how to win. They have that aura."

Any team with a deadly scorer such as Bryant and a sequoia such as O'Neal in the middle would, naturally, develop an aura. And even before the series against the Spurs got under way, the Lakers were basking in their own glow. It's what they do best. Despite his team's struggles against the Timberwolves, O'Neal fell back on his oft-repeated insistence that the only team that causes problems for the Lakers is the Lakers—which amounts to a thinly veiled complaint that his teammates tend to forget that he is the league's most dominant player and should be fed the ball. "I don't worry," O'Neal says. "I have said all year, it's not what other teams do to us. It's what we do to ourselves that hurts us."

Jackson weighed in with his opinion, poking at the Spurs, who have become one of his favorite foils. (San Antonio fans have not forgotten that Jackson hung their championship in the lockout-shortened 1999 season with an asterisk.) After watching tape of San Antonio, Jackson told reporters in L.A. that the plan would be to "throttle" the Spurs' youngsters and that this San Antonio team may be different, but "I don't know if they're better."

Thus, the third installment of this Lakers-Spurs playoff rivalry got under way, with San Antonio hoping its personnel had changed enough to finally alter the outcome of the series and the Lakers strutting and flapping their gums at the Spurs' expense. L.A. may be more vulnerable now than it has been in the last four years, but you'd never know it by listening to the Lakers. "We have to think we have an advantage over everyone," Horry says. "We got the last three rings; no one else does. Of course we have confidence." Just as the script says. **TSW**

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Parker (top) makes the Spurs faster, but Jackson (above, left) figures the Lakers have a firm grip on what happens when the two teams meet.

Formerly known as a nonfactor

It has been the ongoing question in Detroit for the last few years: When will the Pistons get a quality starting small forward? They drafted and traded the enigmatic Rodney White and have been stuck with veteran Michael Curry, with Corliss Williamson coming off the bench. But faced with the challenge of stopping Magic powerhouse Tracy McGrady in Round 1 of the playoffs, Pistons coach Rick Carlisle was forced to scramble. McGrady abused the Pistons in the series' first four games, averaging 36.3 points and leading Orlando to a 3-1 edge. Curry could not keep up with him, and Williamson was undersized and overmatched.

That led Carlisle to scramble all the way to rookie Tayshaun Prince, who averaged 10.4 minutes in just 42 games this season. But Prince is 6-9 with long arms, giving him enough size to harass McGrady. With Carlisle playing Prince an average of 24.0 minutes in the final three games of the series, McGrady's shooting took a downturn. McGrady was just 26-for-72 (36.1 percent) in the final three games, and the Pistons came back to win the series.

Prince even showed confidence offensively, an encouraging sign for his future—and the future of the Pistons in these playoffs. He helped complete the Pistons' comeback with a 20-point performance in Game 7 on Sunday. Still, playing time is no guarantee. Williamson could work his way back into the rotation, and Prince could return to his spot deep on the bench. "I'll be ready, either way," Prince told reporters. "I am making the best of it and staying ready." —S.D.

Team Tude

1. In the last 9 playoff games between the Spurs and Lakers, How many times have the Spurs won?
2. How many years did Stockton and Malone play together?
3. Lakers are one of the teams that are thinking of signing Malone? T or F
4. How many points does Malone need to become the all time scoring leader?
5. Who holds this record now?
6. What player came off the bench to help the Pistons win their series?
7. How old is Tony Perez?
8. Laker's experience is one big weapon they use against their opponent. T or F
9. Ginobili was the top player in Mexico last year. T or F
10. Who did the Lakers beat in the first round of the playoffs?