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Putting the I in the Lakers

By Oscar Robertson

TOMORROW'S N.B.A. All-Star Game is a time to take stock of the league, and thus far the "highlight" of the season was Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers scoring 81 points. That certainly created a buzz. Could he someday break 100, and eclipse Wilt Chamberlain's record from 1962? Possibly. But what's the point? However much he scores, he plays on a team that will have difficulty staying above .500, let alone making the playoffs.

All the attention given to Kobe's feat exemplifies the focus of the N.B.A. **today** - from the news media, the fans and the players - on individual statistics instead of team success. And there are so many more stats than ever before. Not just scoring, but turnovers-to-assists ratio. Steals and blocked shots. Most technical fouls. And the most important statistic of all: who sells the most jerseys.

As far as I'm concerned, the only stat that counts is the win column. To be on top in that category, you have to play team basketball. You can't have just one or two players taking all the shots. When you get into the playoffs, you're going to need everyone to score.

The Lakers have already been through this once, when they first had Shaquille O'Neal playing alongside Kobe. When they needed other players to step up, they ran into difficulty. Now Kobe is being asked to carry the load by himself.

Kobe is certainly one of the two or three most talented players in the game **today**. He works hard, he keeps getting better, and he wants to win. But he's in a no-win situation. The rest of his team is not all that talented. So he gets knocked if he tries to win by scoring more, and he gets knocked if he tries to involve the other players. And no one is going to trade a player to the Lakers who will help them significantly. Shaq isn't coming back, and there aren't any Kareems available these days. But Kobe plays in a show biz town, and as long as his individual exploits put fans in the seats, that seems to be O.K. for the moment.

Even with its present roster, however, I think his team could give him more support, and maybe even steal a few wins along the way. They could step up their effort on defense. They could force their opponents into more of a

transition game. They could take advantage of the defensive attention Kobe draws and run more weak-side plays, double-screens and reverses to open up easy shots for other players.

I have to laugh when I read that the defenses are so much tougher [today](#), with so many different sets, including the zone, and that's why scoring is down again, and that's why Kobe's achievement is even greater than Wilt's. Scoring is down because most offenses [today](#) make it easy on the defense. There's very little ball movement, or moving without the ball. The mid-range game has all but disappeared. It's either force the ball inside and see what happens, or kick it back out for a three-pointer.

My philosophy was always to make the weakest link stronger, and create scoring opportunities for everyone. When you're asking guys to battle for rebounds and play tough defense, you have to involve them in the offense as well.

This philosophy worked in Milwaukee with a speedy forward named Greg Smith, who learned that I would find him if he got out in front on the fast break. It worked in Cincinnati with our center, Wayne Embry, whose limited game under the basket put him at a serious disadvantage against players like Bill Russell and Wilt. But once Wayne saw that he'd be open for mid-range jumpers when I drove to the hoop, he worked hard to develop an outside shot and considerably increased his scoring average. It's important to build each player's confidence, and it's also how you build a team as the season progresses, so everyone is ready at playoff time.

Last season, that sort of team basketball seemed to be making a comeback. The Pistons, lightly regarded, had knocked off the Lakers in the previous season's finals with aggressive team defense and a balanced, fast-moving offense. As a result, we were told that other teams were going to step up the tempo, play better defense, and emphasize team play.

But this season we're back to business as usual. Yes, a few general managers and coaches know how to build cohesive teams by acquiring, motivating and retaining unselfish players who have talent and commitment. They also recognize that a strong bench is critical. These are the teams you generally find atop the standings: Detroit, San Antonio, Dallas, Phoenix (the jury is still out on Miami, New Jersey and the Los Angeles Clippers). Others are trying to instill a team approach, and have success on occasion (Cleveland, with LeBron James, is still a bench away from moving into the top rank). The rest, including some

division leaders, are pretty much interchangeable, most hovering a few games above or below .500.

Building a successful, sustainable team is not easy. Part of the challenge is that many moderately skilled players really believe they are stars, and that the franchise revolves around them. But few players, including some of these “stars,” seem dedicated to the continuous improvement of their games, or to helping their teams improve. Few players seem willing to be role players, to make a contribution off the bench, or actually to earn more playing time. They take their money and go home.

So here’s what [today](#)’s game looks like: The ball goes inbounds, whoever gets it tries to make something happen on his own, and everybody else stands and watches. More often than not, the player with the ball looks for the three-point shot. And nobody guards him! Why wouldn’t you try to stop someone from scoring three points? Even if it’s a low-percentage shot, make it an even lower-percentage shot. Or is that too much like work?

I know, you’ve heard a lot of this from us old-school players. And you’ll continue to hear it. I, for one, care too much about the game to settle for the highlight reel that N.B.A. basketball has become [today](#). I hope Kobe does as well.

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