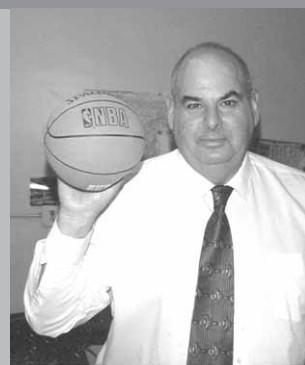


Lakers Are Good, But How Good?

Mitch Chortkoff is in his 31st year writing about the Lakers, the first 23 when he traveled to every game and covered the Lakers' three dominant centers, Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Shaquille O'Neal. His pro basketball column will appear each week throughout the season.



Realizing this day would soon arrive - the day when my first basketball column of the season would be due - I paid attention to several Laker exhibition games on television.

Then I went to Staples Center Sunday to observe the team in person against Toronto and chat with media and scouts from opposing teams.

With the opening game of the 2008-09 season coming up Tuesday, I formed some impressions.

The Lakers, who reached the NBA Finals last season, should be a very good team again. They should win a lot of regular season games.

Why wouldn't they? Their roster includes Kobe Bryant, the league's reigning MVP, and two others who rank among the best players in the league - Pau Gasol and Andrew Bynum. The Lakers also have a Hall Of Fame coach in Phil Jackson, who incidentally looks younger because of less facial hair.

The supporting cast was very important last season, with Jordan Farmar and Sasha Vujacic turning up the tempo when they came off the bench.

Currently Vujacic is injured but the combination of Farmar and Trevor Ariza is producing the same result.

So what could be the problem? Well, there could be several. Let us count the ways this team could disappoint.

First and foremost, Lamar Odom's status has not been determined and has to be. Plain and simply, with Bynum returning from an injury and Gasol continuing to play at a high level there is no room for Odom in the starting lineup unless Bynum comes off the bench, but that would not be wise.

The idea of those three big men being the frontline has been fading as it becomes obvious a traditional small forward is required. If Odom accepts a reserve role he can be a big help but we'll have to see about that. This is the last

consideration because of his strong defense but is not a good shooter. Luke Walton has been injured. Moving Bryant there is intriguing. I trust that Jackson and his assistant coaches will figure it out.

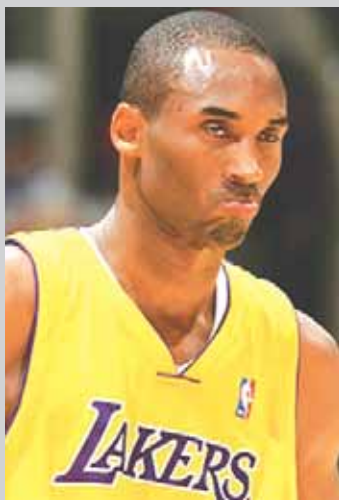
Some veteran NBA people tell me that opponents will play a small lineup, run, run and run some more and test the ability of Bynum and Gasol to get back on defense. Knowing that, Jackson and assistant Kurt Rambis have been relentless in reminding Bynum that he must get back quickly and not only defend his man but any other opponent who gets near the basket.

Bynum is a superb talent, but he's young and inexperienced. And yet, he's being viewed as the guy who could reverse the outcome of last season's Finals loss to the Celtics.

Not to be overlooked is the strength and depth of the Western Conference. If the Lakers falter, a group of teams could pass them. Don't forget the Lakers barely beat out New Orleans last season and were helped in their playoff win over San Antonio by Manu Ginobili's injury. Then there are Dallas and Phoenix, who came up short in the playoffs after making dramatic mid-season trades.

I want to see Dallas with Jason Kidd from the beginning and Phoenix with Shaquille O'Neal for a full season before I conclude that neither is a strong contender anymore.

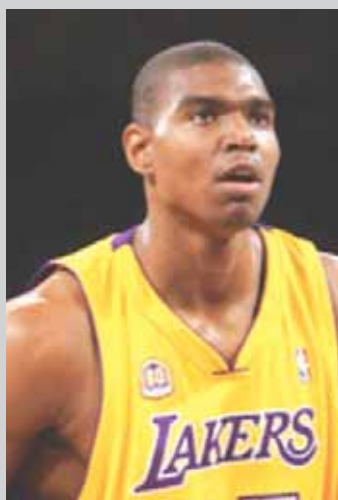
Last but not least is the presence of Portland in the West with Greg Oden enjoying his rookie season a year late due to an injury. This is a young, talented team that went 42-40 last season without Oden. I doubt that they'll win the West but they could make the playoffs and do damage then.



Kobe Bryant



Pau Gasol



Andrew Bynum

year of his contract and he'll want to excel to show his value for other teams next summer.

Then there's the unsettled question of who will be the small forward if he isn't. Vladamir Radmanovic has looked the best, but will he be consistent? Ariza gets con-

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West LA Football Is Looking Better

By Dale Williams
Observer Reporter

All things considered, first-year West L.A. College football coach Marguet Miller likes what he sees when he looks at his team.

And why shouldn't he? Just a few months ago, Miller took over a team that had won just three games in the previous three seasons. Six games into this season, Miller has almost matched that win total, and with a few breaks, the Oilers might have already surpassed it.

After a 36-35 loss to Antelope Valley last Saturday, West L.A.'s record is 2-4 overall and 1-2 in the Southern California Football Association's Pacific Conference. But the Oilers have also lost two games by three points or less.

"We're 2-4, but we're just four points away from being 4-2," Miller said. "We're a young team, but we're getting better. I think we've made significant progress."

In the three seasons before Miller took over at West L.A., the Oilers were 3-27. But this season, even in losses, West L.A. has shown a competitiveness not seen for several seasons.

Case in point was the game against Antelope Valley. Even though the Oilers lost, they almost came back from a 29-0 first-half deficit.

West L.A. showed its fortitude by rallying, with Al White running for a touchdown, Ryan Rosenvall throwing a touchdown pass to Armauni Johnson and Mathew Evans throwing a scoring pass to Sam Rodgers as the Oilers cut AVC's lead to 29-20 early in the fourth quarter.

And even after AVC built its lead back up to 36-20, Ken Overstreet returned an interception for a TD and Evans scored on a 1-yard run and threw a two-point conversion pass to Rodgers to pull the Oilers within a point, 36-35, with 1:18 left. Then West L.A. stopped AVC and got to the Marauders' 35-yard line in the final seconds when Evans threw a 64-yard pass to Johnson.

But Evans fumbled while scrambling and AVC recovered the ball to hold on to the victory.

But Miller praised his team's resiliency.

"We could have given up on that game after falling behind 29-0," he said. "But the kids kept playing hard and almost pulled it out. That shows we're still competing, and that's encouraging."