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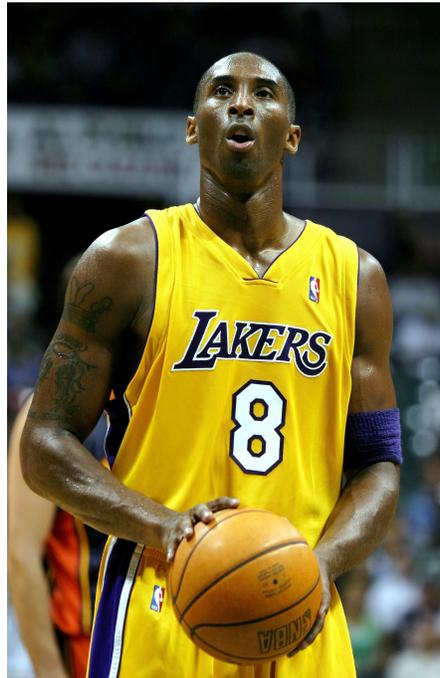
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Kobe Bryant

By Benjamin Shultz



Kobe Bryant, Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.¹

On January 26, 2020, a tragic helicopter crash occurred over Calabasas, California that took the life of esteemed basketball player Kobe Bryant, his thirteen-year-old daughter Gianna Bryant and nine others. Bryant, at age forty-one, had developed a career in basketball that rivaled the careers of peers like Shaquille O’Neil, Pau Gasol, and LeBron James. At the young age of seventeen, he

¹ Photograph by Sgt. Joseph A. Lee of the U.S. Marine Corps, public domain as a work of the United States federal government.

was drafted from Lower Merion High School in Philadelphia to the Charlotte Hornets but traded to the Los Angeles Lakers on draft night and remained with the team for the entirety of his twenty years in the NBA. He was known for being an aggressive player who would never let up, always pushing himself and his teammates to go further each and every game. ESPN would even rank Kobe in both 2008 and 2016 as the second-greatest shooting guard of all time, second only to Michael Jordan who won six NBA championships with the Chicago Bulls in the 1990s. Kobe sought to take risks and always take shots, leaving many to dub him as one of the greatest basketball players of all time with the likes of Michael Jordan and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Throughout his career, Kobe attributed much of his success on the court to what he called the “Mamba Mentality.”² A reference to the Quentin Tarantino movie *Kill Bill* and his own nickname “The Black Mamba,” this mentality represented Kobe’s killer instinct on the court. His strive to win and to pursue greatness made him not only a great player, but also an inspiration for the millions of people who watched him play at the highest level for two decades, being selected seventeen times as an NBA All-Star.

Kobe On and Off the Court

Kobe Bryant and the Los Angeles Lakers won the NBA Championship five times over the course of his career with the Lakers.³ These successes had not been seen by the Lakers since the 1980s when Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson were both on the Lakers’ roster.⁵ Kobe and his other peers had brought

² Tom Fordyce, “Kobe Bryant: Basketball’s Genius, Who Had His Controversies, Was Solving Life After Sport,” *BBC: Sport*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/basketball/51265909>.

³ Kobe would win three back to back to back from 2000-2002, and two back to back from 2009-2010, where he was selected the NBA Finals MVP both times.

⁴ “Kobe Bryant Stats,” *ESPN: NBA Stats*, https://www.espn.com/nba/player/stats/_/id/110/kobe-bryant.

⁵ “Lakers Season by Season Recap,” *NBA*, <https://www.nba.com/lakers/history/seasonbyseason>.

the Lakers back into the forefront of the NBA and reclaiming their top-ranking status in the league. The likes of Kobe's talent and skill, matched with the dominance of Shaq, brought the Southern California team back into the spotlight. The pride that Southern California and the City of Los Angeles felt for the Lakers cannot be understated.

From his success with the Lakers, Kobe would also bring the interest in basketball to the world stage. Kobe would be a part of the U.S.A. Men's Basketball teams in both the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics. In both cases, he would help to win gold for the American team and brought his "Mamba Mentality" to an international audience. Kobe averaged about 15 points a game in 2008 and a record of 26-0 across three tournaments in 2012, bringing fame and recognition to the U.S.A. Men's National Team.⁶ His obsession to win and his passion for the game won him world acclaim and recognition on an international level. Kobe's name would become synonymous with basketball around the world, even being used in such a colloquial way when people referred to the sport. The inspiration he brought out for those with a passion for basketball shows the level of impact he left on the sport.

In 2016, Kobe would play his last game with the Lakers against the Utah Jazz, becoming one of the oldest players at the time to score 60 or more points in a game. In honor of his accomplishments both of his numbers, 8 and 24, were retired by the Lakers becoming one of the first players to have two numbers retired.⁷ This was not the end for Kobe however, as in 2018 he published his first book *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play* in which he reflected on his career and accomplishments. The book

⁶ Brian Mahoney, "US Hoops Back on Top, Beats Spain for Gold Medal," USA Today, August 24, 2008, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2008-08-24-1012609106_x.htm.

⁷ Greg Beacham, "Los Angeles Lakers to Retire Both of Kobe Bryant's Jersey Numbers," *NBA*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.nba.com/article/2017/09/12/reports-lakers-retire-kobe-bryant-jersey-december-18-vs-warriors>.

served as another means of inspiration that pushed people to work harder and pursue their passion, whatever it might be. Kobe would even become the first African-American and former professional athlete to win an Oscar for Best Animated Short Film, *Dear Basketball* in 2018. This film was based off of Kobe's retirement letter and much like his book, sought to inspire people to pursue their passion and to keep on pushing themselves to do better.

Kobe as a Polarizing Figure

With his "Mamba Mentality," Kobe Bryant captured the attention of the world and showed his capability for being successful both on and off the court. Yet there was also a downside to this same "Mamba Mentality." In his striving for stardom, selfishness was one of the key motivators. This selfishness manifested itself in 2003 when Kobe was accused of sexually assaulting a hotel employee in Eagle, Colorado.⁸ The event itself puts the negative aspects of Kobe's public image and success in full view for all to see. This image was clouded even more so when the criminal charges were dropped, resulting in Kobe needing to make a public apology.⁹ Following this event, Kobe was again pushed into the negative light in 2011 when he used homophobic slurs against a referee who had called a foul on Kobe during a game. Kobe was fined \$100,000 and again had to make a public apology, which some activist groups felt was not enough.¹⁰ Like many other celebrities, Kobe had been given power through his stardom and mentality, and these two events represent what happens when that power is abused.

The selfishness that drove some of Kobe's "Mamba Mentality," was also seen on the court. It is well known that while Shaquille and Kobe could be good friends and work together on the court, they could just as easily turn into enemies and rivals off

⁸ Fordyce, "Kobe Bryant."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Kobe Bryant Fined \$100,000 Over Gay Slur in Lakers Game," *BBC*, April 14, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-13075858>.

the court. These clashes between the two star players were constant and this feuding put a strain on the team's playing ability. Kobe could also be a ball hog, causing him to sometimes be seen as working against his fellow teammates instead of working with them. For all the shots he would take he would miss many of them (he is currently the NBA all-time leader in missed shots at 14,481), and was known for stating that he would "rather miss thirty shots in a game rather than nine."¹¹ This mentality manifested itself into his last game, for even though he set a record of scoring 60 points in a game at 37 years old, he left the Lakers with a 17-65 record at the end of the season (the worst ever in the entire franchise history).¹² While Kobe might have had the killer instinct of a "Black Mamba" on the court, at times it came at the expense of his fellow players and stars.

The life of Kobe Bryant was one that has changed the lives of many. His goal to strive for success and stardom made him an inspiring figure not only for fans of basketball, but for others pursuing their individual passions. The killer instinct on the court was one that won the hearts and minds of many, giving Kobe the celebrity status he holds to this day. Yet along the way to this stardom, Kobe hurt people both physically and emotionally. There is no excuse for the things he did and said in this pursuit of power. Kobe's sexual assault charges should not be forgotten, nor should the players that he stepped on to reach his position of prestige.

A Lasting Legacy

What should be taken away from the life of Kobe Bryant? His unique passion and strive to be the best he could be both on and off the court is something to look up to. Not the killer instinct he stood

¹¹ Fordyce, "Kobe Bryant."

¹² "Magic Johnson Has Great Expectations for Los Angeles Lakers Rookie Lonzo Ball," October 15, 2017, <https://www.news.com.au/sport/basketball/magic-johnson-has-great-expectations-for-los-angeles-lakers-rookie-lonzo-ball/news-story/1d0e00fd86f1bfac47a8e592dfbb070d>.

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by, but his desire to improve and build himself up to be the best that he could possibly be. After leaving the Lakers, Kobe dedicated time to his family, particularly with his daughter Gianna and her club basketball team. The love and dedication that he showed to her and other young women pursuing basketball, shows the same drive behind the killer instinct can also act in a positive light. The reason that Kobe Bryant, his daughter Gianna, and nine others were on that helicopter that morning, was to see and play in a game together at Bryant's Mamba Academy. The life and story of Kobe Bryant should be seen as a chance to reflect and learn. To see how passion and drive can lead to greatness and inspiration both on and off the court, yet also to be aware of how it can hurt others intentionally or unintentionally along the way.

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Author Bio

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