

**KOBE
BRYANT**
THE
**MAMBA
MENTALITY**
HOW I PLAY

INTRODUCTION BY PHIL JACKSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN





THE MAMBA MENTALITY

HOW I PLAY

Kobe Bryant

Foreword by **PAU GASOL**

Introduction by **PHIL JACKSON**

Photographs and Afterword by **ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN**

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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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I remember when, as a kid, I got my first real basketball.

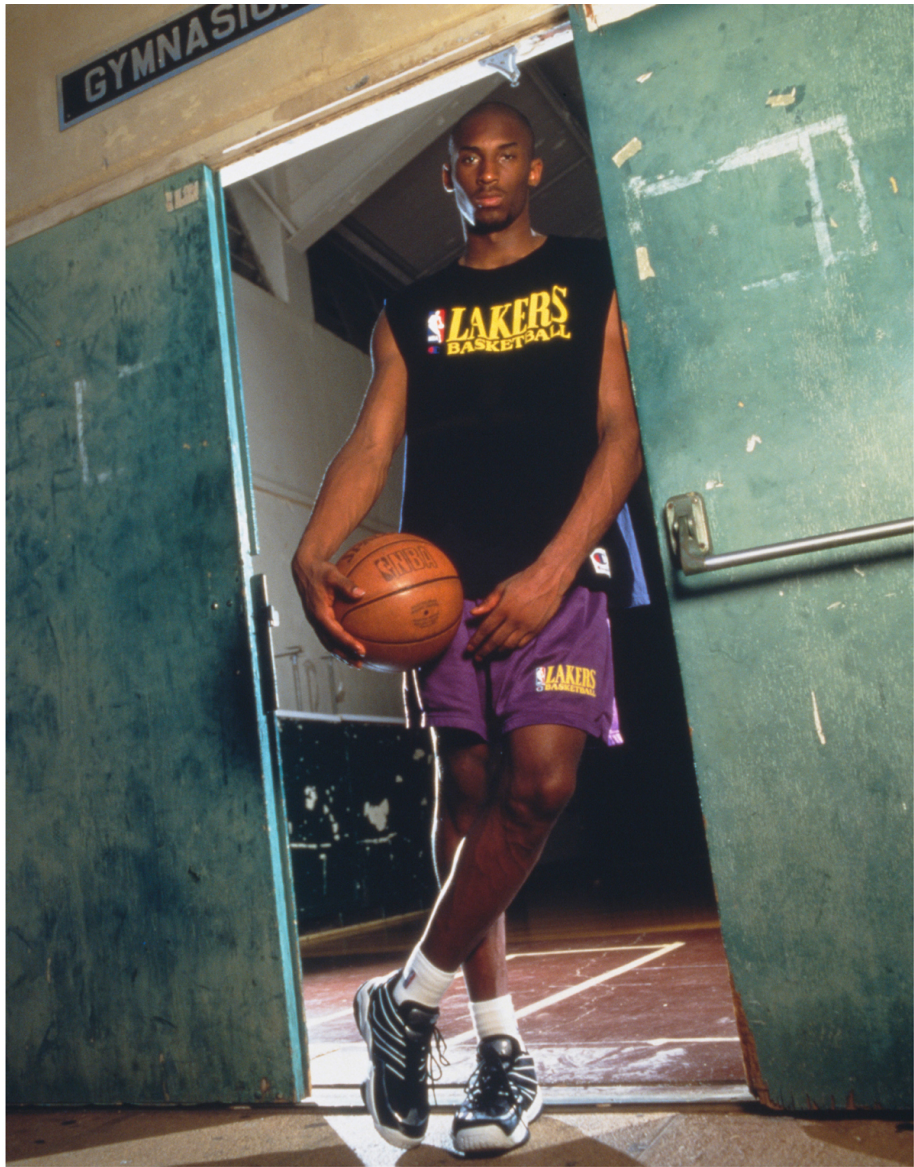
I loved the feel of it in my hands. I was so enamored with the ball that I didn't actually want to bounce it or use it, because I didn't want to ruin the pebbled leather grains or the perfect grooves. I didn't want to ruin the feel.

I loved the sound of it, too. The tap, tap, tap of when a ball bounces on the hardwood. The crispness and clarity. The predictability. The sound of life and light.

Those are some of the elements that I loved about the ball, about the game.

They were at the core and root of my process and craft. They were the reasons I went through all that I went through, put in all that I put in, dug as deep as I dug.

It all came back to that special tap, tap, tap that I first grew infatuated with as a boy.



*This book is dedicated to the next generation of great athletes.
May you find the power in understanding the journey of others to help
create your own.*

Just make it better than this one.

—KB

To my family, thanks for your love, support, and patience.

—ADB

[here](#): NBA All-Star Slam Dunk Contest, February 8, 1997, Cleveland

[here](#): GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS, October 7, 2001, Away

[here](#): MIAMI HEAT, January 17, 2013

[here](#): Practice, 1996, Hawaii

[here](#): Practice, 1996, Los Angeles



FOREWORD

IN FEBRUARY OF 2008, MY LIFE CHANGED.

It was a pivotal moment in my career as a basketball player, but also in my life away from the sport. My path aligned with one of the greatest players to have ever played the game I love.

Just a few hours after being told that I'd been traded from the Memphis Grizzlies to the Los Angeles Lakers, I was on a cross-country flight to L.A., as opposite a city as you can find. The next morning, I had to go through a mandatory physical in order to finalize my trade. The Lakers were on the road and I couldn't wait to join my new teammates, so as soon as my physical was over I got on another plane to Washington, D.C. Kobe called me that morning, asking me to meet up once I arrived at the Ritz Carlton. It was past 1 AM when I finally got to my room, and shortly after I heard someone knocking at my door. It was Kobe. To me, that was a tremendous demonstration of a true leader, and our meeting had a huge impact on me, instantly. The message was clear: there was no time to waste, the moment was now, let's go get ourselves a ring. His mindset was unmistakable—it was all about winning.

One of the qualities that has made Kobe so successful, and always will, is his attention to detail. He always used to tell us: if you want to be a better player, you have to prepare, prepare, and prepare some more. His dissection of the game was at another level. I'm a player who watches a lot of tape, I like to watch my opponents' latest game to see how they are playing at the point that I'm about to face them, but Kobe took it a few steps further than that. I remember it like it was yesterday: we were in Boston during the 2010 Finals and I got a text from him. He wanted me to come to his room to show me a few clips of how the Celtics were covering the pick-and-roll and

how we should attack it for the next game. I know for a fact that degree of detail, both in preparation and study, was a key factor in us winning those championships and many of the successes that Kobe achieved individually.

In my entire career, I've never seen a player as dedicated to being the best. His determination is unparalleled. He unquestionably worked harder than anyone else I have ever played with. Kobe knew that to be the best you need a different approach from everyone else. I remember a time when we got together as a team to have our annual dinner right before the playoffs. I was sitting next to him, and as we were getting ready to leave, he told me he was going to the gym to get a workout in. As much as I was very aware of the amount of extra time he put in outside of our regular work hours, it always shocked me how disciplined he could be even during a relaxed situation. When everyone else was thinking it was time for bed, his mind was telling him it's time to get ahead of the competition.

Over the years, a lot of people have wondered how difficult it must've been to play with Kobe. It really wasn't. All you had to do was understand where he was coming from, what he was about, and how badly he wanted to win. He would challenge players and coaches to match his intensity, his desire, to bring their very best every single day, not just at games, but at practices, too. Kobe wanted to find out what you were made of, and if he could count on you to help him win, plain and simple. I will always be thankful to him. He brought the best out of me as a basketball player, and he made me a stronger person, too. Our time was truly invaluable.

I'm the oldest sibling in my family and I always try to be an example for my two younger brothers, challenge them when I think they need to be and praise them when they deserve it. Kobe is the closest thing to an older brother for me. He never hesitated to tell me things as they were, never sugarcoated anything for me, and challenged me along the way so I could give my best at all times. Through the best moments, but especially during the harder ones, our bond only got stronger and we have always had each other's backs, just as brothers would.

Enjoy this magnificent book, which reflects some of what I've shared here with you, the qualities of an extraordinary person. I have no doubt that you will be inspired.

—**PAU GASOL**, teammate 2008–2014



INTRODUCTION

WARNING: IF YOU ARE GOING TO INVEST YOUR TIME IN READING THIS BOOK, BE PREPARED FOR AN ADVENTURE IN HIGH-LEVEL BASKETBALL.

It will certainly offer a deeper understanding of the detailed and dedicated way Kobe Bryant approached the game. It's one thing to have talent, but another to have the drive to learn the nuances. James Naismith is credited with having said "basketball is an easy game to play, but a difficult game to master." This is a window into the mind of someone who mastered it. The combination of Andy Bernstein's exceptional photography and Kobe's insights might make you a better player if you're inclined.

Kobe came into the NBA with a desire and talent to become one of the greatest players of all time. He achieved that goal through his dedication and perseverance. The opportunity to play for the Lakers, a historic franchise, gave him an audience and a forum, but his level of success came entirely from within.

Kobe and I first met in 1999 at the Beverly Hills Hilton, on the day I was formally announced as the Lakers' coach. We were in a suite, before I went down to meet members of the press assembled in the ballroom. Kobe wanted to impress upon me how happy he was to have the opportunity to

play in the triangle system—and how much he already knew about it. He was already a “student of the game,” and had studied various aspects of the offense. Here he was, 20 years old, sounding like he’d been a pro for a decade.

By nature, the triangle offense is confining and disciplined. There is little room for a player to just go rogue. It was a planned, programmed way to play. Push the ball upcourt and look for an early shot; if it’s not there, build the triangle; read how the opponent’s defense is going to react; attack their weakness and apply your strengths. My twin sons are just one year younger than Kobe, so at that point I had a pretty good perspective on young men and their varying ability to focus on tasks. I had also had the privilege of coaching a number of players who had said the same thing during my tenure with the Chicago Bulls. Even at that young age, though, Kobe kept true to his word about being a student of the game.

Kobe actually broke a bone in his wrist the very first game of preseason that year, and missed the first 14 games. We had gotten off to a good start without him, and I was concerned he might require some “break-in” time to fit into the mix. It wasn’t a problem. He kept the team winning as his first priority and we kept rolling.

A month or so after he returned to active play, I received a call from Jerry West, who wanted to relay a conversation he’d had with Kobe. Kobe had called to ask him how he and Elgin Baylor had both been able to score 30-plus points a game while sharing the ball on the same team back in the 1960s. After Jerry probed a bit, Kobe admitted he was worried he wasn’t going to score enough points to become “one of the greatest players in the NBA.” This concerned me, because as a coach I didn’t care how many points a player scored—only the final numbers on the scoreboard. But Kobe knew what he was capable of doing, and felt limited by our system. That clash had all the warning signs of becoming a problem. Of course, there was real substance behind his drive—he went on to total 33,643 points in his career, ahead of Michael Jordan and just behind Karl Malone and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

That first year, Kobe played alongside Ron Harper in a two-guard system at the top of the floor. They were in charge of “setting the table”—recognizing when the fast break was over, secondary action was limited, and it was time to set up the triangle system. Naturally, there was always a

temptation to push the envelope, and sometimes Kobe would go rogue. He'd break from the plan to create an opportunity for himself, and it would jam up our offensive flow. So we had our conversations about not trying to take over a game. We also had our film sessions, centering on what skills made a guard a good playmaker. In retrospect, Kobe was as patient with me as I was with him. We tolerated each other, and the result was that he came to understand how disciplined our team had to become in order to win that coveted championship. As much as he loved to score, Kobe usually knew or intuited what the right thing to do for the team was in the moment.

The Lakers had been a bridesmaid the past two seasons, winning a ton of games but getting swept out of successive playoffs. Shouldering the pressure that came with that history, Kobe, of course, made the plays. The Lakers got over the stigma of coming up short and went on to win three championships in a row. Each of those years was dramatic and full of memorable games and moments. Kobe was the driving force, while Shaquille O'Neal, the Diesel, was the focal point of the offense—"Get the ball to the big fella," as we'd say. The group of Lakers went to four finals in five years, in essence creating a dynasty.

The next segment of Kobe's career was when his maturation took place. After the Shaq-Kobe era came to a close, he became the senior statesman for a team that had lost all of its other starters via retirement or trade. He was the major thrust of the team and its nominal leader, perhaps by default. And leadership is a tough thing to master, especially when you know a championship is beyond the reach of your personnel.

At one point in our early years with the Lakers, Kobe and I stood together before practice and watched five of the other players hold a shooting contest. It was similar to the game "Cat," where a player had to mirror and match the shooter before him, or he was eliminated. They had asked me to hold off the start of practice because the game went around the entire arc, using both corners, both wings, and the top. I asked Kobe, competitive as he was, why he didn't play against his teammates, and he said it was because he wasn't a three-point shooter. But in the year that followed, he was determined to fix that: During the off-season Kobe worked diligently on his three-point shot. It was always about the details. And in the 2005–06 season, Kobe went off and averaged more than 35

points a game, leading the NBA in scoring. He had become a scoring machine.

I could go on listing records and accounts of his scoring prowess, but that was really a side note to Kobe's evolution as a player. My staff would meet at 8:30 AM at our facility before a practice or game to prepare for the coming day. More often than not, by the time I pulled in, Kobe would already be parked in the car next to my designated spot, taking a nap. He would be in the gym well before that, maybe by 6 AM to get his pre-practice workout done before anyone else showed up. That was the trademark of the final 10 years of his career. Kobe led by example for his teammates. They couldn't keep up—but they were always challenged by the example he set.

In 2007, I met with Kobe to discuss the Olympics in China. That team was packed with stars and had practiced together that summer in preparation for the next year, when they would go on to win gold. My message to Kobe was this: If you are going to do the extra off-season things, you must recognize you only have a certain amount of time left on your legs. Practice is not a big concern of mine, you know the system. I will give you as much time as you need between games to recover if you will keep your leadership intact by being present. He would do his physical therapy while the team went through their skills and drills and come onto the court when competitive action commenced. He encouraged his team and sometimes played the coaching role for the second unit. I was watching Kobe go through extreme routines to get himself ready to play games and thought there might be a window of five or six years left in his career. Again he changed the landscape, and his determination to extend his physical prime blew out the norm. He played almost 10 more years of NBA high-intensity basketball, which stands as a measure of his character.

The photographs in this book are a testament to the manner in which Kobe has thought about the game. In fact, the way Kobe approaches basketball has prepared him for the “next” phase of his life, one that already looks as interesting and intense as his long career with the Lakers.

—**PHIL JACKSON**, coach 1999–2004, 2005–2011

