

The #1 New York Times Best-Selling Series



Who Was Kobe Bryant?



by
Ellen Labrecque

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by Ellen Labrecque

illustrated by Gregory Copeland

Penguin Workshop

To my friends and former colleagues at *Sports Illustrated Kids* magazine—who were there for the Kobe years—EL

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 9780593225707 (paperback)
ISBN 9780593225714 (library binding)
ISBN 9780593225721 (ebook)

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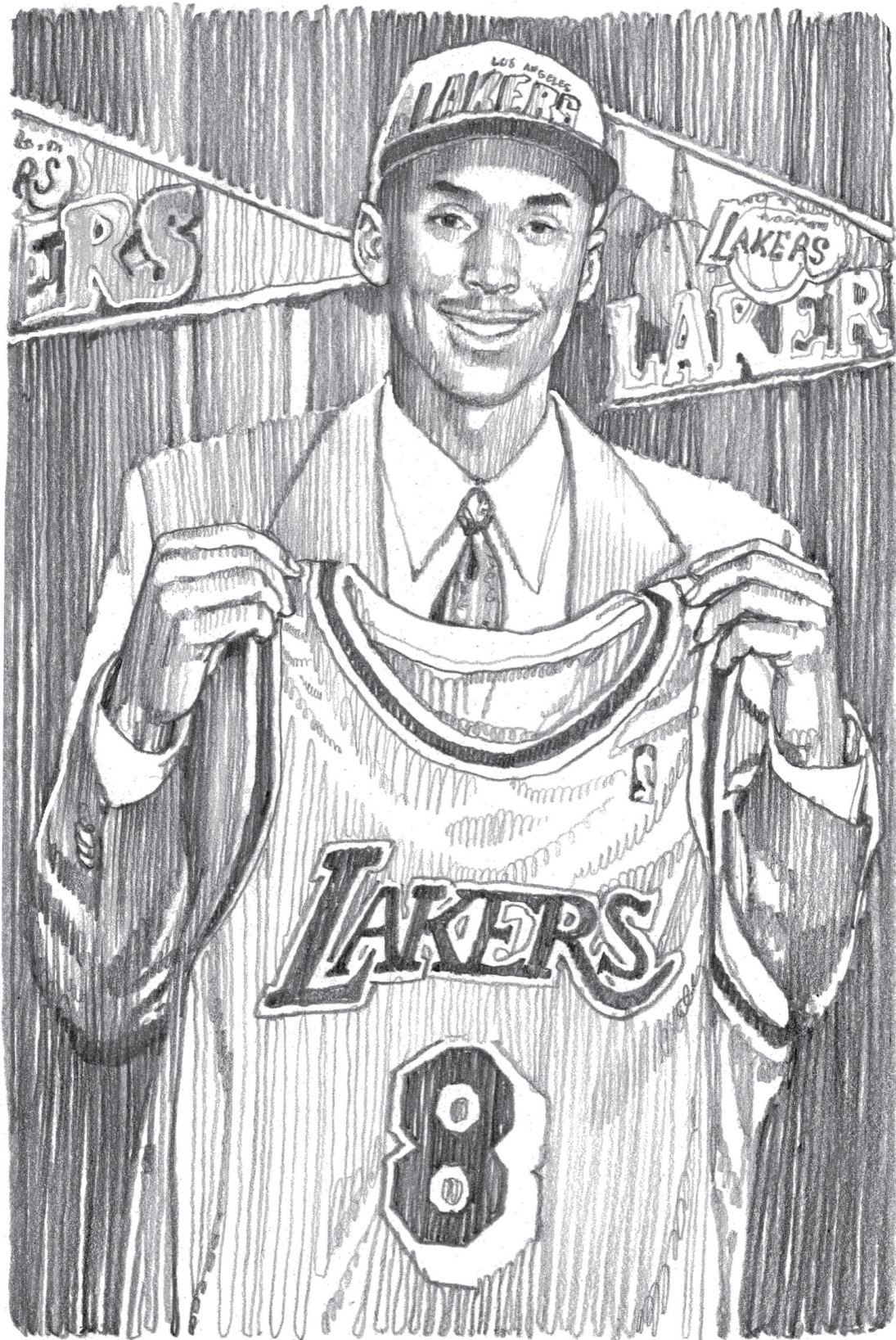
It was June 26, 1996, the night of the National Basketball Association—the NBA—draft, when professional teams select new players. Wearing a dark suit on his slim six-foot, six-inch frame, Kobe Bryant, seventeen, was waiting for his name to be called. Just days earlier, Kobe had graduated from Lower Merion High School outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was considered the best high-school basketball player in the nation. High-school players usually went to college to prepare themselves for entering the NBA draft. Kobe was different. He wanted to become a professional right away.

“Playing in the NBA has been my dream since I was three,” Kobe said.

The Philadelphia 76ers—Kobe’s hometown team—had the first pick in the draft. They chose Allen Iverson from Georgetown University. The first twelve teams all chose college players. Finally, the Charlotte Hornets selected Kobe with the thirteenth pick.

Once his name was announced, Kobe put on a Hornets baseball cap before he walked to the podium to greet the TV cameras.

Kobe, though, would never play one minute for the Hornets. Even as he smiled in front of the cameras, Charlotte was already talking with the Los Angeles Lakers about trading Kobe for an experienced center, Vlade Divac. The Hornets, with number thirteen, had a much higher pick than the Lakers, who had the twenty-fourth selection. Charlotte chose somebody who would be a valuable trade for Los Angeles. The Hornets already had all-stars who played shooting guard, Kobe's position. They wanted someone like the seven-foot-one-inch-tall Divac.



Kobe was grinning on the outside, but the details of the draft would stick with him. The fact that twelve—really thirteen—teams had passed on him would fuel his drive to be the best for the next twenty years.

Kobe did become one of the NBA's greatest players of all time. He won five NBA titles, led the league in scoring two times, and was an eighteen-time All-Star.

But on the day of the 1996 NBA draft, seventeen-year-old Kobe still had his whole career in front of him—and he was ready to play.