

We both graduated from high school in May of 1996. He, of course, was headed to Los Angeles after the draft trade with Charlotte, while I was about to begin my freshman year at Indiana University. The following four years found me more consumed with the waning years of Bobby Knight's tumultuous tenure than with Kobe's meteoric ascension, but his name kept popping up in conversations with fellow sports fanatics.

Then came 2000. I moved to L.A. a few months after graduating college — the same few months after Kobe had celebrated his first NBA Championship. 2000–2003 was a magical time to be in Hollywood. Three incredible consecutive jobs in the entertainment industry were punctuated by three more dominant Lakers seasons. And though I wasn't a Laker diehard by any means, the town is a trillion times more fun when "Showtime" is constantly humming from the Staples Center. These were golden years. Lively. Fun. Even in the wake of 9/11, Los Angeles was an undeniable bastion of enjoyment during that span.

2004–2007 was a much different stretch. Besides a personal battle with troublesome health maladies, my Hollywood career was faltering. Failure after failure. Close call after close call. And in Lakerland? Shaq had left to join Dwyane Wade in Miami, while Kobe became embroiled in a horrifying sexual assault case. The fun had ceased in every direction. I was eerily on the precipice of financial and spiritual ruin, and "Showtime" looked like a distant memory. Still, through it all, Kobe's personal plight as a player and fallible human was often a welcome distraction to my own.

2008. Resurgence. Kobe win's league MVP after Pau Gasol joins the team, and the Laker's claw their way into the NBA Finals. And though I am running on dust economically speaking, something compels me to scrape together a few hundred bucks so I can see him in person for myself — having purchased a ticket to sit high in the rafters of game 5 — after the Lakers were already down 3–1 to the Celtics and the series was essentially over. It was worth every penny. The crowd was electric. A spark flickering in my belly once again.

Then the Summer Olympics in Beijing. Burgeoning NBA stars saw firsthand EXACTLY what Kobe Bryant meant to the rest of the world. His light was the brightest. His unfathomable work ethic revered by billions. LeBron, Wade, Bosh, Anthony, Paul, Howard — all big winners themselves by now — all got to see firsthand how they paled in comparison to the man known as Mamba. A gold medal! I was beyond inspired. The spark inside me now a spiring inferno.

A few months later I landed a job tending bar at the Sunset Marquis Hotel, a haven for celebrities and those of a high net worth. 2009 and 2010 were luminous, as the magic had returned to Tinseltown once more. The job was brilliant in every aspect, and the Lakers captured back to back titles with Kobe at the helm. Night after night for two years patrons would visit my little corner of the world while I poured them drinks, and we'd watch as the Lakeshow took on all comers...one player in particular the the inspiration to every conversation. To every

toast. To every extra tip I'd receive when they won and he had a grand night. Which was basically every night he played.

In 2010 I left that job and started my real estate career in earnest, trading in libations for bigger commissions. However, I did say "yes" to one private party in particular back at the Sunset Marquis when my old boss called looking for an extra pair of hands. Paul Gasol was having a bash, and I was hoping Kobe would show, if only for a glimpse of the man up close. He didn't, but his shadow loomed large, and you could hear the chatter around the room all night, everyone hoping he'd make an appearance. Even for a moment.

I never met the man. Didn't see his short film, don't subscribe to his Mamba Mentality videos, have zero takes on who he really was as a player or what happened that fateful day in Colorado in 2003. But I do owe a quarter of my lifetime to a decade of his. They are forever intertwined, and today I am filled with an imminent grief for a fallen superhero. Grief for his family and the families touched by the accident. Grief for the fans around the globe who he inspired. Grief for the ethos of my own fragile country. Grief for my own logos and yearning need to write this post. But mostly, I am filled with grief for a second act that will never be culminated. RIP Kobe. You are legend.