

HBO ORIGINAL

WINNING TIME

— THE RISE OF THE LAKERS DYNASTY —



COMPANION GUIDE
Season 2 Episode 2

The following is not a comprehensive summary of the facts or fictional scenes depicted in the show but is a selection of what we thought would be fun points of interest from Episode 202.

WERE MAGIC AND THE TEAM THAT OUT OF SYNC?

According to Magic's 1983 memoir, he struggled both physically and emotionally on his return. He describes feeling like an odd man out amongst his fellow teammates, discovering that the guys had new inside jokes; a camaraderie borne of their extended time without him.

For their part, the Lakers talked enthusiastically to press about Magic's return, but behind closed doors, frustration reigned. In his memoir, *The Winner Within*, Pat Riley described that because of Magic's popularity, the team felt that people were paying more attention to Magic's absence than to the fact that they were winning even without their famous player.

In various accounts, as well as contemporary reports, Magic's teammates admit to resenting the out-sized emphasis put by both press and the front office on Magic's big return. According to several accounts, the other guys felt their accomplishments were overlooked in lieu of Magic's. While they mostly said the "right things" publicly, all accounts describe these tensions in the locker room. And for good reason: the team had found a way to win without their star—racking up an impressive run (28-17) before Magic returned.

Norm Nixon was especially frustrated; with Magic sidelined, he had been having an All Star-caliber season, racking up a league-high in assists. Now he would have to move aside to share ball-handling duties. This made for an uneasy situation, both on and off the floor. In his book, Magic describes a near collision with Norm during a practice when both maneuvered to receive the same inbound pass.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; Rich Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult. 1983.

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; William Novak. *My Life*. Random House. 1992.

Page 7.

BOOK: Riley, Pat. *The Winner Within*. Berkley Books. 1994. Page 46.

WAS THAT FIRST GAME BACK A TOTAL CIRCUS?

The hype was real. The Lakers franchise sold Magic's big return in a big way...Because they had to. Despite a winning record in Magic's absence, the team's ticket sales were down. Only 2 of 22 home games sold out while he was injured. Indeed, Buss was so intent on capitalizing on his star's grand return he changed the date to make sure it happened at the Forum! (Magic was originally slated to return during a road trip to New York, but Buss postponed it by...citing concern for his star's health.) As part of "The Magic is Back" campaign, Magic was welcomed back to the team by a sold-out crowd and over-the-top fanfare—including buttons and t-shirts!

Magic details the evening in two memoirs, relating how even though he wasn't in the starting line-up, he was introduced on the PA (not common practice). He also describes being so consumed by anxiety that he wasn't fully aware of how it made his teammates feel ignored.

Jim Chones really did tell the press he thought it was "a circus." And according to Magic's memoir, it was clear to him that Jim was just the only person saying this out loud.

Jeff Pearlman describes that first game back in his book, *Showtime*:

Two hours before tip-off, a gaggle of reporters and photographers lingered in the team's locker room, recording every step, itch, and scratch. When Johnson entered the trainer's room to have tape applied to his ankles, media folks followed. Wrote the Los Angeles Times: 'U.S. Senators receive less coverage.' Added the New York Times: 'The press coverage was like that for a departing astronaut' (Pg. 115).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014.

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; William Novak. *My Life*. Random House. 1992. Chapter 10.

BOOK: Johnson, Magic. Richard Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult. 1983. Pages 3-10.

ARTICLE: "Tonight the Lakers Put a Little Magic Back in Their Lives" - The LA Times - Feb 27, 1981

“SUAVÉ” — DID COACH WESTHEAD REALLY SAY THIS TO MAGIC?

Yes; Pearlman describes that moment in his book *Showtime*: “Before the game, Westhead pulled Johnson aside and told him, ‘There’s a Spanish word for what I want you to be tonight. Suavé, suavé. Easy, easy. Take it easy tonight, OK?’” (Pg. 116).

Westhead took his own advice by keeping Magic on the bench until quite late in the first quarter, much to the chagrin of fans who came to see him play.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014.

ARTICLE: “Magic’s Back – Lakers Glad They’ve Got Him” – The LA Times – Feb 28, 1981

WAS THE BIG GAME REALLY SUCH A BUST?

Big-time. In Paul Westhead’s memoir, he relates concerns over having a star player return both out of shape and out of sync with a team that was already in a groove—especially so close to the playoffs. As it turned out, his concerns were well-founded. Magic’s first pass went straight into the hands of the Nets’ Maurice Lucas. From there, the Lakers kept on struggling, eking out a modest 107–103 victory. Though triumphant, Magic himself called the game anticlimactic. Magic describes the game in his 1992 memoir, *My Life*: “The game itself was anticlimactic as well as poorly played. It was obvious we were distracted. And it was just as obvious that a few significant adjustments would be required. At one point Norm and I almost collided in the backcourt” (Ch. 10).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; William Novak. *My Life*. Random House. 1992.

BOOK: Riley, Pat. *The Winner Within*. Berkley Books. 1994. Page 46.

ARTICLE: “Magic’s Back – Lakers Glad They’ve Got Him” – The LA Times – Feb 28, 1981

DID MAGIC REALLY SUFFER FROM A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE?

According to Magic in his 1992 memoir, he sure did. In that memoir, he describes a physical aspect (how difficult it was to get back into shape) and a mental one: losing confidence in his own body. He recalls being afraid to play as aggressively as he did before the injury, for fear of it recurring. He recalls feeling tentative, gun-shy, not attacking; afraid one burst of speed could end his career.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; William Novak. *My Life*. Random House. 1992. Chapter 10.

DID RILEY ACTUALLY BECOME HIS SENSEI?

According to Magic's 1983 memoir, it was indeed Pat Riley who helped him get back into form – with drills and exercises after practice. According to Magic, Riley pushed him to his breaking point with an additional thirty to forty-five minutes of drills and practice every day after the team's regular practice.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic. Richard Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult, 1983. Pages 210-211.

DID NORM REALLY TALK S* *T TO THE PRESS?

Yep, and that's a direct quote: "15 years from now, everyone will have forgotten Magic." Although Norm is speaking to a fictional journalist in our show, Norm said this — on the record — to journalist, Mike Littwin. Well known for giving off-the-record commentary to reporters, oftentimes in frustration over Magic or his other teammates, this time Nixon went too far. The published article sparked a media feud between Norm and Magic, with the press only too happy to amplify that animosity. After the team's playoff loss, Dr. Buss went on a tirade to a gathering of press, blaming them for ruining team chemistry.

Jeff Pearlman writes about the Norm press issues in *Showtime*:

Buss, generally loathed to criticize the media, offered a blistering critique of the Times, insisting the paper had set out to cause controversy just in time for the playoffs. Nixon concurred. '[The press] took everything I said and twisted it around' (Pgs. 118-119).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020.

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014.

BOOK: Ostler, Scott. Steve Springer. *Winnin' Times*. MacMillan. 1986.

ARTICLE: "Magic Johnson on CBS" - The LA Times - May 4, 1981

ARTICLE: "The Lakers Other Guard: Norm Nixon Remains a Spectacular Talent Who has This Nagging Idea He Isn't Being Used Correctly" - The LA Times - Mar 31, 1981

ARTICLE: "The Lakers' Loss" - The LA Times - April 11, 1981

DID THE LAKERS REALLY THINK OF DEALING NIXON?

They sure did. The Lakers' front office was keen to trade Norm Nixon for the high-flying, prolific scorer, David "Skywalker" Thompson. And the full story is even wilder than we let on. In his autobiography, Westhead outlines his opposition to the trade: though West wanted to trade Nixon for Thompson to give the team the best guard tandem in the NBA, Westhead felt Norm was essential to the flow of his new offense. He also liked Norm as a hedge against Magic's rising ego. As a result, he put a halt to the trade and insisted on investigating further. According to Westhead, he flew to Seattle, bought a ticket to see the Nuggets play the Sonics, and donned a disguise to scout the superstar in person and incognito.

Meanwhile, with his front-office and head coach at odds about the trade, Buss did indeed turn to Magic for advice. And sure enough...Magic was all for it, telling Buss the trade would benefit the team. When Westhead learned of this, he vetoed the deal. But not without fallout...

In Westhead's telling in *The Speed Game*, the failed trade amplified two key rifts on the team: the first between Magic and Norm, the second between himself and management (especially Jerry West).

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Chapter 11.

BUT IS THIS REALLY WHY THEY LOST IN THE FIRST ROUND?

The consensus in all accounts is that the Lakers lost that year because of chemistry—not talent. Back then, the first round was a best of three “mini-series.” So while the Rockets had a mediocre season, all they had to do to upset the defending champs was win two games.

Team turmoil spawned from the resentment toward Magic, as well as his media feud with Norm, blew up any shot at cohesion—culminating in a no-holds-barred shouting match when Norm confronted Magic in the locker room before Game 2. In *The Winner Within*, Pat Riley described the fight between Magic and Norm over comments made to the press as “one of the most painful and inappropriate things I’ve ever seen” (Pgs. 45-46). Tensions were so hot that Westhead even considered benching Magic in Game 3—until Buss warned him not to.

Norm claimed his words were taken out of context, per Jeff Pearlman’s *Showtime*:

‘[The press] took everything I said and twisted it around...But it wasn’t a slight against Earvin at all. I went to Magic and told him that, but he was younger than I was, and I don’t know if he handled it the right way, mentally. I think it bothered him, and then the perception was there that Nixon can’t play with Johnson. And once a perception exists, it’s awfully hard to change that. It turns into fact’ (Pgs. 118-119).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Ostler, Scott. Steve Springer. *Winnin’ Times*. MacMillan. 1986. Page 135.

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014.

BOOK: Riley, Pat. *The Winner Within*. Berkley Books. 1994. Pages 45-46.

WAS THAT WESTHEAD/RILEY TENSION REALLY THERE?

Unfortunately, yes. While it’s not clear that Riley kept his practice sessions with Magic secret from the head coach, his growing closeness to the star did have Westhead on edge. In Paul Westhead’s book, he says that while not intentional, Riley was becoming “overly confident in his position” (Ch. 7) and was giving Westhead the impression that he thought he knew more than he did about coaching.

For his part, Riley expressed doubt about Westhead's judgment as head coach. This led to simmering resentment between the two men.

Pearlman describes Riley's frustrations with Westhead in *Showtime*:

"Although he never said so publicly, behind closed doors he expressed confusion over a system that deemphasized the Lakers' greatest strength – a pair of point guards who could think on the fly. Johnson found a sympathetic ear in Westhead's right-hand man, whining to him about the blessed Jack McKinney offense that won the team a title, then was promptly dismantled." (Pg. 136).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Chapter 7.

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014.

DID JACK MCKINNEY UPSTAGE HIS FORMER PROTEGÉ?

In an irony of Shakespearean proportions, McKinney did indeed win coach of the year in 1981 - besting Westhead, his old protégé.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Chapter 15.

ARTICLE: "The Rise and Fall of Jack McKinney" - The LA Times - Jan 14, 1985

ARTICLE: "Erving Outpolls Bird for MVP Award" - Hartford Courant - May 28, 1981

DID MAGIC REALLY LOSE HIS PLAYOFF MOJO?

Sadly—for Lakers fans—that airball was dead-accurate. Down by one point, with a chance to win the game and series, Magic took the play into his own hands... and lost the game in as heroic a fashion as he'd won Game 6 the year before. In his own account, Magic says the play was designed to get the ball to Kareem in the post. Westhead chose Magic to bring the ball up court (instead of Norm) because his superior height made him better equipped for the entry pass. But Magic never made the pass. He

claimed at the time he didn't think Kareem was open but admitted after watching the replay that he could have found the big man.

In the end, the Lakers were the first defending champs to be knocked out in the first round.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

ARTICLE: "Magic Misses Everything and Lakers Go Out Losers" – The LA Times – April 6, 1981

Winning Time is a dramatization of certain facts and events. Some of the names have been changed and some of the events and characters have been fictionalized, modified or composited for dramatic purposes.

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