

HBO ORIGINAL

WINNING TIME

— THE RISE OF THE LAKERS DYNASTY —



COMPANION GUIDE
Season 2 Episode 3

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 some fun points of interest from Episode 203.

HOW PISSED WAS BUSS ABOUT THE PLAYOFF LOSS?

According to accounts, it would be difficult to exaggerate his level of frustration. In his memoir, Westhead says Buss was especially upset by the double whammy of the Lakers' loss to Houston in the first round, coupled with Boston's first title of the 1980s. In Westhead's view, one of Buss's biggest fears was looking like a "buffoon." Indeed, at the owner's meeting that summer, the Boston owner had publicly humiliated Dr. Buss with a verbal chewing-out in front of all the other owners – a scene we dramatized early in episode 201.

Licking his wounds, Buss was determined not to waste another season. He consulted his basketball brain trust to find out where his winning team went wrong - and the lion's share of pressure fell on Westhead: to win big next year... or else. Westhead describes vacationing with family in Hawaii, and getting a frantic, late-night phone call from Buss. Buss was adamant that the team needed not only to win that coming year, but win big - and be exciting while they did it.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Kindle Edition. Page 115.

ARTICLE: "Buss Begins the Laker Autopsy, Saying There'll Be Some Changes Made" - The LA Times - April 9, 1981.

DID BIRD REALLY DROP OUT OF I.U.?

Larry Bird may be the greatest and most famous basketball player to come out of the state of Indiana - a state that prides itself on basketball. But his first college year was rocky. Larry was recruited out of high school by legendary coach Bobby Knight to Indiana University. But shortly into his freshman season with the Hoosiers, Bird dropped out. According to an article in the *Indianapolis Monthly*, Bird "left Bob Knight's Indiana University Hoosiers before a single game... the brazen choice to return home didn't just become the stuff of legend; it's what set Bird on the path to become one."

Larry says that he was homesick and felt like a fish out of water in the 'big city' of Bloomington. He saw himself as a poor kid from French Lick, and the relative wealth of his fellow students made him feel out of his depth. In an interview for *ESPN*, Bird said, "The school was just too big. I was a homesick kid who was lost and broke."

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Bird, Larry; Bob Ryan. *Drive: The Story of My Life*. Bantam. 1990.

ARTICLE: "Larry Bird's Greatest Shot Was the One He Didn't Take" - Dec 24, 2015 - Indianapolis Monthly.

ARTICLE: "Plain and Simple, Bird one of the best" - Larry Schwartz - ESPN.

A LEGEND BORN OF TRAGEDY

Larry has described his father, Joe Bird, as his best friend. A man who doted on his son, encouraging him to be strong and independent. But Joe was a tragic figure in his own right.

Wracked by financial troubles, Joe was frequently between odd jobs, and a penchant for drinking led him to occasional run-ins with the law. After Joe and Larry's mother divorced, Joe fell into a severe depression. On at least one occasion, he told his children he wasn't planning to be around much longer, insisting they'd be better off if he were gone.

Larry Bird speaks to this personal history in his memoir, *Drive: The Story of My Life*.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Bird, Larry; Bob Ryan. *Drive: The Story of My Life*. Bantam. 1990. Pages 6 - 15.

LAKERS TRADING CHONES

Jim Chones was a very popular player on the Lakers, who had been more than instrumental in their 1980 championship victory. But when Westhead became convinced that free agent power forward, Mitch Kupchak, was the answer to the Lakers big man prayers, he was happy to throw Jim Chones into the deal to make it happen. According to our own interview with Jim Chones: "I cursed that motherfucker up and down."

According to Westhead's book, *The Speed Game*, "Whenever the press commented that we needed a backup center, Buss was angered that I forced him to give up Jim Chones"(Pg. 107). Jerry West thought

the astronomical price tag on Kupchak, who was asking for \$800k/year, was absurd. And Buss may have been inclined to agree... until Westhead convinced him Kupchak was the missing piece who would win the team another title.

So Buss opened up the coffers, making it clear that he expected no less than a championship in return. Westhead was convinced that the controversial deal for Kupchak put him in Buss's crosshairs: he had to win another ring that year, or it would cost his job. It didn't help that Kupchak lasted only a short while before going down with a season-ending knee injury. As a result, he never came close to contributing the way Westhead had promised.

...As a player, at least.

FUN FACT: After Kupchak's injury, Jerry West took the recuperating player under his wing, mentoring him – as an executive. Kupchak would go on to become West's deputy, and eventually the General Manager of the Lakers in the 2000s, leading the team to multiple banners. Years later, West (as GM for the Memphis Grizzlies) gave his former protégé a key assist by trading to him none other than future Laker legend Pau Gasol.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014. Pages 127-128.

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

DID LARRY REALLY DOMINATE HIS COLLEGE TEAM IN JEANS?

They don't call him "Larry Legend" for nothing. As recounted in *Indianapolis Monthly*, this is how it went down: after Bird left IU, Bill Hodges, an Assistant Coach at Indiana State, relentlessly tried to recruit him to come play for his Sycamores. When Larry finally succumbed to scrimmaging against Hodges's team in Terre Haute, he showed up at the ISU gym in blue jeans. Hodges offered him basketball shorts and sneakers, but Larry declined. Larry insisted he was used to playing in jeans (even in the French Lick summer heat), and took the floor. Bird demolished his varsity squad in game after game after game. Bird enrolled at ISU that fall.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Davis, Seth; *When March Went Mad: The Game That Transformed Basketball*. Times Books. 2009.

BOOK: Bird, Larry. Magic Johnson. Jackie MacMullan. *When the Game Was Ours*. Mariner Books. 2009.

ARTICLE: "Larry Bird's Greatest Shot Was the One He Didn't Take" - *Indianapolis Monthly* - Dec 24, 2015.

DID JEANIE REALLY ALLOW HER DAD TO TRADE HER BROTHER'S GIRLFRIEND?

It is true that Dr. Buss traded his son Johnny's then-girlfriend, Australian tennis phenom Dianne Fromholtz, from Jeanie's LA "Strings" to (of all teams) the Indiana "Loves." While this trade was made in exchange for the great Chris Evert, Jeanie later acquired Martina Navratilova, who helped nab the 19-year-old owner her first sports championship.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Buss, Jeanie; Steve Springer. *Laker Girl*. Triumph Books. Kindle Edition. 2010. Loc. 2484.

DID WESTHEAD REALLY EDGE OUT RILEY WITH A NEW ASSISTANT?

While Riley's perspective on the situation is unknown, Westhead notes in his book, *The Speed Game*, that he did bring in a second assistant coach: his former assistant at LaSalle College, Mike Thibault. His official role? To help scout pro and college players. With Thibault, Westhead believed he would have the needed intel to navigate West's efforts to control his roster. Thibault's hiring was not popular with West, who criticized Thibault at every turn. But Westhead believed that as long as the team was doing well, he could weather the criticism.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Page 88.

ET TU PAT?

The friction between Westhead and Riley - though dramatized - is drawn from various accounts that the

bond between these two men, who had once been close as brothers, was beginning to fray. Though Riley never badmouthed Westhead publicly, behind closed doors, he expressed doubts about Westhead's leadership, as well as confusion over the wisdom of an offensive system that deemphasized the Lakers' greatest strength: two fast point guards. Meanwhile, Westhead began to believe Riley was becoming too big for his role as an assistant. Magic describes the mounting tension between the two in his memoir from the period. The two men stopped eating meals together and, due to the mounting stress, Riley began chain smoking.

Pearlman discusses in *Showtime*:

Even Pat Riley, Westhead's assistant and a man of genuine loyalty, was scratching his head over the shifts. 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 (Pg. 136).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

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

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

RED DRAFTING BIRD

Though the dialogue is fictionalized, the facts of the scenario are true: under NBA guidelines at the time, a player's draft eligibility was based on being four years removed from his high school graduation. Since Larry had dropped out of IU, he was older than his classmates at ISU – and that's how Red exploited this loophole to draft Larry as a Celtic the summer BEFORE his final year of college basketball...in 1979. It's for this reason, that despite playing Magic in the NCAA Championship, Bird was not included in that summer's draft.

But Red had taken a big gamble. Although he had secured Bird's draft-rights with the 1978 Celtics pick, it was still Larry's option whether or not to come into the league at all! And after losing to Magic's Michigan State Spartans, Larry apparently considered the possibility of staying in college for another season in order to win an NCAA title. If he chose to do so, the Celtics' draft rights would expire – and Red's pick would have been wasted.

This led to what was reportedly a fierce negotiation between Red and Larry's agent. Bird was asking for a lot, but Red was no pushover - even going so far as to express some skepticism about Larry's ability. In *Sports Illustrated*, Red was quoted saying that Bird was "just a cornerman," someone who, by virtue of position and skill set, was ill suited to being the centerpiece of a championship team. Was this just bluster? Posturing? Probably. But that's what made Red, Red. Needless to say, the Great Red got his wish. Larry Bird wore green.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Bird, Larry; Bob Ryan. *Drive: The Story of My Life*. Bantam. 1990.

ARTICLE: "Two for the Show" - Sports Illustrated - October 15, 1979.

SPEAKING OF CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS... 25 YEARS FOR \$25 MILLION?

Well, the extravagant touch was never far from Jerry Buss's mind. Nor was his sly ability to be extravagant while also cutting himself a shrewd business deal. In 1981, Buss offered Magic a lifetime contract: \$25 million over 25 years. At the time, this was the longest and most lucrative contract in the history of sports. Since no player had ever played as long as 25 years at a professional level, this deal would clearly extend well beyond Magic's playing days – thus guaranteeing him a future job with the Lakers in some capacity.

It seemed ludicrous. But what few recognized – apart from Dr. Buss – was that the amount of \$1 million per year for a player of Magic's caliber would very soon become a paltry sum. He saw the future: the new free agency rule would send salaries into the stratosphere. So while everyone, including Magic, believed this contract to be lavish gesture and display of loyalty, Buss knew he was getting a lifetime of Magic...on the cheap.

Indeed, within a few years, Magic realized he was being underpaid and renegotiated the financial terms with Dr. Buss.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

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

THAT PICKFAIR SCENE WITH NORMAN MUST BE BULLS* *T, RIGHT?

Nope. This one lands in the "truth is stranger than fiction" department. The story goes like this: hoping to put to rest the bad blood of the previous year (when Norm and Magic feuded in the playoffs), Buss took

both men to Vegas for a weekend boys' trip. There, the scene played out almost entirely as it's portrayed on screen. Buss said all the right things about wanting Nixon to be happy...but his offer of a trade was quite clearly a barely-concealed threat.

We set the scene at Pickfair, but the details are true per Magic's own account in his 1983 memoir, *Magic*: Dr. Buss had arranged a "lavish brunch," but didn't waste time on any small talk. He looked directly at Norm, and began grilling him: Was he still able to play with Magic? Did he think Magic attracted too much press and fan attention? Did he need the ball too much? Etcetera. Buss continued that, if any of that was a problem for Norm, he would be happy to trade him elsewhere; and that any other team in the league would be thrilled to have a player like Norm Nixon because he was that talented. To which Norm responded that there was no problem or jealousy between him and Magic, that he loved LA, loved playing for the Lakers, and that he wanted to stay.

With that said, it was left to Magic for the coup de grace: whereupon he jokingly asked Norm to stop eating all his fruit. According to Magic, a good laugh was then shared. And, after this meeting, Magic says he could rest assured all conflict between him and Norm was resolved...

At least until a couple seasons later, when they traded Norm for Byron Scott.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

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

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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