

HBO ORIGINAL

WINNING TIME

— THE RISE OF THE LAKERS DYNASTY —



COMPANION GUIDE
Season 2 Episode 4

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 204.

DID THE LAKERS REALLY THINK THEY'D MAKE THE COVER?

Yep. During training camp, the Lakers had participated in what they thought would be the cover story of that year's *Sports Illustrated* 'Pro Basketball Issue.' But when the issue hit the stands, they saw none other than Larry Bird—trying as best he could to smile.

The Lakers story landed as the gatefold and the photographer described the idea for the photo shoot as a staged photo of Paul Westhead as a professor in a classroom—with his Lakers posed dutifully like pupils. The headline? That's real, too: "*What are Norm Nixon, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Jamaal Wilkes, and Magic Johnson doing in a classroom with Laker Coach Paul Westhead? Hitting the blackboards.*" This photo shoot and article became a major source of resentment on the team, and according to various accounts the Lakers became "*united*" in "*disdain*" for Westhead. Westhead had a knack for returning to his "Shakespearean scholar" roots by quoting the playwright, and it irritated the team. While they didn't openly gripe to press, Nixon and Johnson hated the picture—which made Westhead look like "*a genius*"... much more competent than they believed him to be. One anonymous Laker official said the article "*reinforced negative feelings about Paul, and made some guys angrier than they had been.*"

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014. Pages 123-125.

ARTICLE: "Gifts that God Didn't Give"- Sports Illustrated - Pro Basketball Issue, Nov 9, 1981

ARTICLE: "The NBA Goes Back to School"- Sports Illustrated - Nov 9, 1981

WAS RAMBIS REALLY SUCH A LONG-SHOT?

Kurt Rambis was one of the great underdogs in NBA history. Having spent time in the Greek league, intending to go on to medical school, he was giving professional basketball one last go as part of a summer league in San Francisco when he was spotted by Mike Thibault, and asked to try out for the Lakers. By all accounts, Rambis was an eccentric; a "*ragamuffin*" known for pilfering free food and sodas from the team pantry, and for his signature mustache, thick-framed protective glasses, and shaggy mullet hairdo.

For his part, Jerry West was unimpressed by Rambis. He wanted the long-haired player cut from the squad. And sure enough, his opposition to Rambis was what saved the future Laker starter. Resenting West's intrusion, Westhead decided to keep Rambis on the team to prove a point. It may have been his greatest and most lasting personnel contribution as the Lakers coach.

Pearlman describes West and Westhead's thoughts on Rambis in *Showtime*:

Westhead was on the fence when it came to keeping Rambis. Would he hold up against the best of the best? Could he contribute? Then, during a practice, the coach was approached by Jerry West, who looked toward Rambis and snapped, 'Who invited the guy with the long hair? What's he even doing here?' Westhead was furious. How dare someone question his ability to piece together a team. At that moment, Rambis's roster spot was secured. 'Years later, Paul told me that Jerry's words saved me,' Rambis said. 'I had no idea' (Pg. 175).

More from Pearlman on Rambis's persona in *Showtime*:

[Rambis] emerged as one of the great NBA eccentrics. 'What Magic was to basketball,' said Michael Cooper, 'Kurt was to goofiness.' This, again, is not insult. Simply fact (Pg. 172).

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

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

WAS THAT PRESEASON GAME THE REAL DEAL?

Yep! The Lakers played a preseason exhibition game against the Celtics. This pitted the last two defending champs—and heated rivals—against each other in a contest... that didn't count. But for Paul Westhead, it was important. According to accounts, including Magic Johnson in his autobiography, *Magic*, Westhead coached the game as if it were for all the marbles, using his starting lineup extensively—and tiring them out. And this, even as the Celtics played only their backups. By half-time, the Lakers had racked up a sizable advantage. Yet once the Celtics put their starters in, the score became respectable. In the end, Westhead's Lakers won the game...but the victory did not exactly prove his point.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic. Richard Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult, 1983. Page 29.

ARTICLE: "Lakers Practice Beating Celtics" - The LA Times - Oct 13, 1981

DID BUSS REALLY TRY TO KEEP THAT MAGIC CONTRACT SECRET?

You better believe it. Buss knew the massive deal would ruffle feathers, so he and Magic had agreed to keep the details on the down-low...But it was Buss himself who blew the cover, when he was accosted by reporters who professed they'd heard the details from a "league source." While we don't know if Red was responsible for the leak, we do know it was someone in the league office—who presumably opposed the giant deal—that spilled the beans.

Once reported, Magic's new contract caused considerable turmoil—especially with his own teammates. In his memoir, *Magic*, Magic said that he was "in shock" and that it was like "being in the middle of an earthquake." Kareem was particularly incensed, referring to Magic as Buss's "favorite child." There's little doubt that his frustration contributed to a public flirtation with the idea of leaving Los Angeles to finish his pro basketball career in his home-town of New York. Indeed, for a time he was so intent on departing the Lakers that he turned down multiple extravagant contract extensions offered by Buss in an effort to mollify the situation.

According to accounts, Norm, too, resented the contract. And even the ever-loyal Michael Cooper bristled at the realization that his so-called Magic had become more akin to management—with a contract that ensured he'd be a Laker for life.

Pearlman writes about Kareem's reaction to Magic's contract in *Showtime*:

'He's getting all that money, and all the publicity.' Abdul-Jabbar, the longest-tenured member of the team, greeted the news of Johnson's windfall with uncharacteristic emotion. The morning after it was announced, he asked the Los Angeles Times, 'What is [Johnson], player or management? We don't know.'...

Abdul-Jabbar was not alone in finding this troubling. He derisively referred to Johnson as Buss's 'favorite child,' and said the team's morale was on the brink of ruination. 'They were giving him all this money and saying, 'Here's the ball, go entertain everybody,' he said. 'They would never have said it, but the unstated thing was not to win, but to entertain. A basketball team is like a family. If you pick one person out and put him in front of everyone else and say, 'This is my favorite child,' other people in the family are definitely going to be affected by it' (Pgs. 128-129).

Pearlman discusses Norm's jealousy in *Showtime*:

Nixon, jealous of Johnson even without the \$25 million deal, was irate. He had tried his best to convince himself that the two were equals as star guards, star ladies' men, big-time performers. Then...this? Nixon ran into Johnson...A pained expression crossed his face. 'Buck, what's going on?' he said. 'The guys are talking. They say you are hanging out all the time with Buss. That's a no-no in this business.'... 'Players and management don't hang out together,' Nixon said (Pg. 129).

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*. Richard Levin. Magic. Viking Adult, 1983. Pages 14-15.

ARTICLE: "Abdul-Jabbar Said to Want to Play Here" - NY Times - Jul 31, 1981

ARTICLE: "Abdul-Jabbar Decides LA's Really the Place" - The LA Times - Aug 4, 1981

HOW BADLY DID THE GUYS DESPISE THE SYSTEM?

Real bad. It started on the floor: confused and confined by the highly regimented offense, the Lakers struggled right out of the gate, going 2-4 in their first six games. But Westhead stayed committed to his System, and by many accounts, became snippy with players who deviated from its precepts. The players came to feel their coach had a need for total control. It was oppressive. Magic notes his frustration over the System in his memoir, *Magic*: "Each day he introduced new play-sets. It got very confusing...I don't know what he's trying to do," Norm said. "Everybody's running into everybody else" (Pg. 25). Westhead never wanted to hear any excuses, demanding that the players run his plays.

In his memoir, Westhead says he felt Magic was unwilling to cooperate with anything unless it was on his terms. He'd only work hard when he felt like it. Magic has been vocal about his frustrations with Westhead's offense, but as Westhead sees it, this was only an excuse. He believes the true problem was still Magic's knee: that he was struggling, post-injury, and scapegoated The System in frustration.

The one Laker who appreciated the new style was Kareem, who benefitted from an offense where he wasn't asked to run on the fast break. He could, instead, post up and receive the ball in the post to go to work. To this day, Kareem is the only Laker of the era to have seen the beauty (such as there was) in Westhead's System.

And thanks to Kareem's dominant performance in the offense, the team did start to win...although by smaller margins, and in a less exciting manner than they'd been accustomed.

Indeed, the Lakers racked up five wins in a row...making Westhead one of the only coaches in NBA history to be fired during a winning streak.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic. Richard Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult, 1983. Page 26.

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Kindle edition. Page 117.

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.

ARTICLE: "Lakers Get Their Act Together" - News-Pilot - Nov 12, 1981

ARTICLE: "Lakers Find Themselves Home at Last" - The LA Times - Nov 14, 1981

GET OFF THE BUS

This too, really happened. According to various accounts, Magic was growing increasingly frustrated with Westhead's System, and petulantly refused to board the team bus after a brutal loss to the San Antonio Spurs.

Pearlman further recounts Magic's mounting frustrations with Westhead in *Showtime*:

The Lakers won two of their next three games, but it mattered not. The chemistry between coach and players was becoming increasingly strained and awkward. Especially the chemistry between coach and one particular player. 'Magic really came to hate Paul,' said Cooper. 'I mean, he really hated him. Magic's the type of guy, when he gets on the bus he says hello to everybody—'Hey, what's up? How you doing? What's going down?' Now he would get on the bus, walk straight to his seat and just sit there. He wouldn't even look at Westhead—not even for a second. Magic would walk right past him, like he wasn't even there. "In practice, usually Magic would be on the top of the key, asking for the ball, and he'd be bobbing back and forth, all energy. Now he would just stand straight and still. And I said, 'This shit is not looking good. And Westhead would talk, giving instructions like coaches do, and Magic wouldn't look at him. Westhead would tell him what he wants, and Magic would say, cold as ice, 'So you want me to go over there and do that?' And he did exactly as he was told. But usually Magic would dribble and bounce and respond with energy. But with Westhead...you had a coach trying to get his star's attention, and his star basically saying, 'Fuck you. I don't believe in a thing you're doing'" (Pgs. 137-139).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Ostler, Scott. Steve Springer. *Winnin' Times*. MacMillan. 1986. Page 158.

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

HOW FRUSTRATED WAS RILEY?

Very. According to accounts, the simmering tension between Westhead and Riley grew worse in this period. In his memoir, *Magic*, Magic observed that Westhead and Riley who once had a relationship that he described as “almost brotherly” no longer sat together. Indeed, the tension got so bad that, as Mark Heisler explained in *The Lives of Riley*, it forced Riley to wear a neck-brace due to stress.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Johnson, *Magic*. Richard Levin. Magic. Viking Adult, 1983. Page 82.

BOOK: Heisler, Mark. *The Lives of Riley*. Macmillan. 1994. Page 55.

IF THEY WERE WINNING, WHY WAS WESTHEAD FIRED?

What brought the situation with Westhead to a head was Magic’s dislike of his coaching style. He made it clear to teammates, including Michael Cooper, that he was no longer having fun as a Laker. And word of his frustration made its way to Buss. Buss convened a meeting with West and Sharman, where he agonized about what to do. Fire yet another head coach? A person he himself had paid a princely sum? Ultimately, Buss decided to stand pat...until Magic forced his hand.

Jeff Pearlman describes the meeting between Buss, Sharman, and West in *Showtime*:

In the midst of the streak, Buss called Bill Sharman, the general manager, and Jerry West, the assistant, into his office for a lengthy talk. Though the two men considered themselves the franchise’s sole basketball decision makers, Buss’s ear now belonged to Magic Johnson. Ever since the playoff loss to Houston, Buss increasingly shared the point guard’s position that Westhead was either impossibly stubborn, in over his head or incapable of change. Now, with Johnson again directly requesting Westhead’s dismissal, the owner felt compelled to act. ‘Let me start off the meeting by saying that I’ve reached a decision that I would like to fire Paul Westhead,’ he told the two men (Pg. 140).

There are conflicting accounts of West’s role leading up to Westhead’s firing. Some accounts claim West and Sharman urged Buss to be cautious. In his own book, West admits that although he thought Westhead was incredibly smart, he didn’t communicate well with the players and had a hard time getting along with them. West thought Westhead was in over his head and wasn’t the right fit as Head Coach of the Lakers.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

BOOK: West, Jerry; Jonathan Coleman. *West by West*. Little, Brown, and Company . 2011. Pages 129-130.

ARTICLE: "Magic isn't working on Teammates" - Daily News - Nov 15, 1981

DID MCKINNEY REALLY PLAY A ROLE IN WESTHEAD'S DOWNFALL?

The game with Indiana happened just as it's depicted. McKinney and Westhead's relationship had been tense since the latter replaced the former as head coach before the 1980 playoffs. While their lunch at Hamburger Hamlet is a fictionalized scene, the conversation is based on real, lingering hostility between the two. Jack had won NBA Coach of the Year in his new role as head coach of the Pacers, and met his former protege for an emotionally charged contest at the Forum. Westhead's Lakers won the game in double overtime. But given the vastly more talented Los Angeles roster, it's hard not to see this as a moral victory for Jack McKinney.

In his memoir, *The Speed Game*, Westhead said that it was clear Jack McKinney wanted to defeat the Lakers as "payback for his mistreatment by the Lakers" and he believed that Laker fans who were unhappy with the way Westhead was coaching seemed to want the Pacers to win to bolster their case to get him fired. Even though the Lakers defeated the Pacers, subsequently winning three games that weekend, Westhead was shocked that Buss nonetheless decided to fire him after the game in Utah.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*.

University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Kindle edition. Page 122.

ARTICLE: "Lakers Beat Pacers in Double Overtime" - The LA Times - Nov 16, 1981

ARTICLE: "NBA has lost its Romance for McKinney" - The Courier-Journal - Dec, 25, 1980

DID MAGIC AND WESTHEAD REALLY HAVE IT OUT IN UTAH?

Yes—and it was just as brutal as depicted. Westhead and Magic got into multiple arguments at Salt Place the night of November 18, 1981. By all accounts, Utah was an awkwardly constructed team. But the Lakers were so befuddled by Westhead's System that the Jazz stayed close.

Magic describes a tense moment during a timeout in his memoir, *Magic*, when Westhead yelled at him to turn around and pay attention to him. Magic recounts that he was so angry that as soon as the buzzer went off, he got up from the bench and walked onto the court by himself without Westhead noticing.

After the game—a narrow victory—Westhead requested a moment of Johnson’s time. According to numerous accounts, they stepped into a 9’12” equipment room, and shut the door. This whole time, reporters lingered in the hallway. When Johnson emerged, he angrily kicked a water cooler.

Riley acknowledges witnessing these moments, and admits perhaps he should have intervened. He knew tensions were high, and could sense Magic’s frustration playing at a slower pace. He also knew Westhead’s patience was running thin with the outspoken guard.

Jeff Pearlman recounts Magic and Westhead’s heated conversation in the equipment room at the Salt Palace in *Showtime*:

After the players entered the small visitors’ locker room, Westhead requested a moment of Johnson’s time. They walked into the nearby equipment room...‘I’m tired of your horseshit attitude,’ the coach said. ‘And I’m not going to put up with it anymore. Either you start listening to me, or you don’t have to play’... ‘You might as well sit me down, because I ain’t being used anyway,’ Johnson said. ‘Just sit me down.’ ‘I don’t want to hear that,’” Westhead replied. ‘Are you done?’ asked Johnson. ‘Yes,’ said Westhead. Johnson exited the room (Pg. 142).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic. Richard Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult, 1983. Page 83.

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

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

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

ARTICLE: “Westhead Goes Out Without So Much as a Whimper” - The LA Times - Nov 21, 1981

DID RILEY REALLY SEE IT COMING?

Riley has since acknowledged that he saw the disastrous fallout between Westhead and Magic coming, but decided (due to a split allegiance to both star and coach) to stay out of it.

In their book *When the Game was Ours*, Magic and Larry Bird quote Riley saying, “Maybe I could have stopped it. It was an awkward situation. I loved Earvin, but I was working for Paul” (Pg. 87).

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

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

THE BOMBSHELL

This, too, really happened. After the confrontation with Westhead, Magic retreated to the Salt Palace locker room to stew. When reporters were allowed in, they immediately swarmed. Teammates recount a total silence falling as they awaited Magic's response. And then it came: he matter-of-factly told the reporters that his differences with Westhead were irreconcilable; they didn't see eye to eye; and that he'd speak to Dr. Buss about a trade.

In an article for *The LA Times*, Magic is quoted as saying, "I can't play here anymore. I want to leave. I want to be traded. I can't deal with it no more. I've got to go in and ask [Buss] to trade me." And Westhead was really quoted saying that, "an almond tree bears fruit in silence."

FUN FACT: This was the first time a star player in the NBA had made such a demand. But it would not be the last. These days, it's common practice for star athletes to determine their own fates by demanding to be traded from one team to the next. Magic broke the ground.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

ARTICLE: "Magic's Bombshell: He Wants to Be Traded" - The LA Times - Nov 19, 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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