

HBO ORIGINAL

WINNING TIME

— THE RISE OF THE LAKERS DYNASTY —



COMPANION GUIDE
Season 2 Episode 5

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 205.

WAS THIS THE CRAZIEST DAY IN LAKER HISTORY?

It's high in the running. And it all really happened. Let's take it one by one...

The day after Magic's public trade demand, Westhead was bombarded with questions from reporters. He tried to downplay the situation but was surprised to learn that a front office meeting had been scheduled with Dr. Buss. In reality, he learned this when he read it in a newspaper. Naturally, Westhead assumed he'd be a part of that pivotal meeting... But he never got a call. Instead, Buss met with Sharman and West at Pickfair.

Buss felt he was damned if he did, damned if he didn't when it came to firing Westhead. Whether or not he let Westhead go, Buss was concerned that people would think he came to the decision solely because of Magic's request for a trade and didn't want people thinking Magic had influenced him. He's quoted in Ostler and Springer's *Winnin' Times* as saying, "If I don't do what I had already intended to do, then I will have actually done what I will later be accused of doing - making my decision because of Magic" (Pg. 169).

Jerry West recounts in his autobiography, *West by West* that Dr. Buss asked if he would assume the role of head coach, to which he replied, "No way." West didn't want to become head coach again because it made him "so miserable and... [he] didn't think [he] was very good at it" (Pg. 130).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Kindle Edition. Page 124.

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

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

DID WESTHEAD'S DAUGHTER REALLY TELL HIM HE WAS GOING TO BE FIRED?

From the mouths of babes... When Westhead was informed that he was not to be a part of the front office meeting, he had lunch with his daughter Monica instead. There, according to Westhead's memoir, she told him what she thought would happen: his team was going to fire him. Westhead laughed off her conclusion and told her not to worry. Westhead had good reason to be assured. For one thing, he was sitting on a brand new contract, just over one year removed from winning a championship in his rookie campaign (under duress!), had the best active record of any coach in the NBA... and was riding a five game winning streak!

On top of all that, Magic's demand was absurd. At that time, no player had ever demanded his coach be fired... not to mention prevailed in the ensuing melee. It just did not happen. What Westhead didn't realize: he was at the center of a shocking sea-change in professional sports. The Super Star had just been born... and he was flexing his muscles.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Kindle edition. Page 125.

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

ARTICLE: "Magic's Bombshell: He Wants to Be Traded" - The LA Times - Nov 19, 1981

SO... DID MAGIC REALLY GET PAUL WESTHEAD FIRED?

Magic would say no. He has. On numerous occasions. And Buss, at least officially agreed with him – insisting he was already planning to replace his coach. But was he saving face?

Buss did admit to being frustrated that Magic talked to the media without consulting him first. And though the conversation happened over the phone and not in person, Buss told Magic so in no uncertain terms, saying it was inappropriate and immature and that "[he] shouldn't have said anything. [He] stuck [his] nose in the wrong place" (Pg. 86). Contributing to Magic's frustration: he had come to realize by this point that his \$25 million deal was actually a better deal for Buss. In any case, Magic made it clear it was a case of him or Westhead. If the coach remained a Laker, the star would not.

So did Magic 'get' Westhead fired? You decide.

In Jeff Pearlman's *Showtime*, he addresses the Magic/Westhead impasse like this:

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).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

BOOK: Bird, Larry. Magic Johnson. Jackie MacMullan. *When the Game Was Ours*. Mariner Books. 2009. Page 87.

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

BOOK: "Magic's Bombshell: He Wants to Be Traded" - The LA Times - Nov 19, 1981

DID BUSS FIRE WESTHEAD JUST LIKE THAT?

This firing scene is based on several accounts of the meeting, which took place in Buss's office at the Forum. Buss met with Westhead and told him he was letting him go. Westhead was surprised. He had come prepared to resolve tensions. And he thought it was important for Buss to show Magic that he, not the players, made important decisions about the team. According to his book, Westhead thought that Buss decided to fire him rather than deal with Magic.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Kindle edition. Page 126.

BUT...DID BUSS REALLY FIRE HIS COACH WITHOUT A PLAN?

Yes. Buss fired Westhead without knowing who his next head coach would be. In Buss's meeting with Sharman and West, he asked West to fill in as coach following Westhead's dismissal. West hated his time as coach and wanted

no part of this. He suggested Riley... And somehow the meeting ended with both men thinking they had got their wish: Buss thought West had agreed to be a 'co-coach' with Riley, coordinating the Lakers' offense, with Riley in charge of defense. West and Buss shook hands on it... But West came away with a very different idea of what they had agreed to: he thought he had signed on to oversee Pat Riley, not co-coach at his side.

The difference came to a head when Buss and West met Riley immediately prior to announcing the new situation to the press. Before they reached an understanding – not to mention a consensus – the conference had begun... And it was every bit the cluster-f**k.

Pearlman describes a scene of major miscommunication in *Showtime*:

Buss had summoned Jerry West and Bill Sharman... to figure out what to do next. In the course of the conversation, he asked West to return to his old job, as coach. To which the basketball legend responded with a cluster of words that, depending on who is asked, translated to one of the following:

'I'll do it for a game or two.'

'Sure, that'd be great.'

'Helllllllllll no.'

'Considering how much Jerry hated being a coach, I can't imagine he wanted that job,' said Norm Nixon. 'I mean, it just wasn't something he liked to do.' Somehow, Buss came to the conclusion that West not only accepted the position, but did so enthusiastically. He shook hands with the two men, then asked them to meet with Riley and explain to him the situation (Pg. 150).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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. Page 175.

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; Rich Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult. 1983. Page 86.

THE PRESS CONFERENCE

Much of the dialogue depicted is verbatim, as surviving footage and a transcript of the press conference confirm... along with the account in Jeff Pearlman's *Showtime*.

EASTER EGG: The reporter who asks Dr Buss, *"There's a game tomorrow night. That game will end. Will both coaches come out and talk to us?... I mean, who picks the starting lineup?... Yeah, which one of these two?"* is played by none other than Jeff Pearlman!

The surreal press conference is described in Riley's biography. Riley, who's close friend was just fired in stunning and dramatic fashion, who only a few hours ago thought maybe his career was going to end with Westhead's firing, entered a room packed with manic, foaming at the mouth reporters. Reporters hot on the heels of a huge, sensational story, filled with personal intrigue and drama. He was already in a daze when Buss stepped to the podium, and tried to name West the coach. West then dumped the job like a hot potato onto Riley's lap. The whole thing was a disorganized, convoluted, chaotic mess. In *Showtime*, one of the reporters who was there said the press conference was, "The weirdest event I've ever covered" (Pg. 151). And yet this, one of the most bizarre press conferences in sports history, was the launching pad for one of the greatest coaching and executive careers of all time. It seems too good to be true. But that's the story, heretofore forgotten by history, depicted in the episode.

The press conference took place on November 20, 1981.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Pearlman, Jeff. *Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s*. Gotham. 2014. Pages 150-153.

BOOK: Heisler, Mark. *The Lives of Riley*. Macmillan. 1994. Pages 59-63.

DID LAKERS FANS REALLY TURN ON THEIR BELOVED MAGIC?

We've become so inured to the power of superstars that it's difficult to recall a time when they couldn't force a coach out of a team without some blow back. But in 1981, when Magic was perceived to be the force behind Paul Westhead's ouster, the backlash was severe. Magic was vilified. He lost endorsement deals. His 7Up commercials no longer aired; and though 7UP claimed that choice was made prior to Westhead's firing, few believed them. An LA Times article quoted a 7Up executive who said that based on what was being reported in the press, they decided to remove the commercials featuring Magic.

Indeed, in the game after Westhead's firing, Magic was booed...by his own team's fans at the Forum. As a player who always fed off the fans' energy, the backlash was demoralizing. For weeks, Lakers fans wrote the 'letters to the editor' that labeled Magic a "spoiled brat," a "prima donna," and a "crybaby". This bothered Magic, who described in his book, *My Life*, that he hated feeling like the "bad guy," and that fans booing him did affect his game.

And Dr. Buss did not emerge unscathed: Jim Murray, the LA Times's legendary columnist, excoriated him – just as depicted. As a fan of Murray's, this bothered Buss especially.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Ostler, Scott. Steve Springer. *Winnin' Times*. MacMillan. 1986. Pages 172-173.

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; William Novak. *My Life*. Random House. 1992.
Kindle edition. Loc. 2441.

ARTICLE: "Now, 7-Up is Turning Magic Down" - The LA Times - Jan 15, 1982

ARTICLE: "Readers Write: The Magic Has All But Disappeared" - The LA Times - Nov 25, 1981

ARTICLE: "Just Call Him Earvin Johnson; Magic is Gone" - The LA Times - Nov 24, 1981

ARTICLE: "Laker owner Buss deserves all he's got coming to him" - Daily News - Nov 29, 1981

DID KAREEM ACTUALLY ROLLER-BOOGIE?

You bet – and it must have been a groovy sight. Kareem's athletic ability was not limited to basketball. On top of being a powerful runner, swimmer, bicycle racer, martial artist, yogi, and tennis player, he was also excellent on roller-skates; known to be a "terror on wheels," at Flipper's Roller Boogie Palace, a rolling disco he and Cheryl frequented in those years.

As for the scene itself, while the dialogue is a dramatization, we know that Kareem was upset when Westhead was let go. He and Westhead had a close relationship – the closest of Westhead to any player on the team. And after the details of Magic's \$25M deal emerged, Kareem expressed public frustration about Magic being treated with such favoritism, hinting he might even prefer to play for the New York Knicks. It was to smooth this over that Buss offered Kareem a higher-paying contract – though in fact this offer took place in August 1981, before Westhead was fired (November 1981). Nonetheless, Kareem declined, turning Buss down to test the waters of free agency. Though as it turns out, the contract he eventually agreed to with the Lakers was for less than the one Kareem initially refused.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Westhead, Paul. *The Speed Game: My Fast Times in Basketball*. University of Nebraska Press. 2020. Kindle edition. Page 112.

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; Rich Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult. 1983. Page 99.

ARTICLE: "A Different Drummer: Get inside the mind of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar" - Sports Illustrated - Dec 16, 2014

ARTICLE: "Now-it-can-be-told-dept" - The LA Times - March 5, 1982

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

DID BILL SHARMAN REALLY BLOW OUT HIS VOICE?

The trouble with Sharman's vocal chords dated back to his coaching days in the 1970s. He was a yeller, and his constant shouting from the sidelines took its toll. Though this coughing fit is dramatized, it was around this time that Sharman's issue became severe enough to force him to step down as the G.M.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: West, Jerry; Jonathan Coleman. *West by West*. Little, Brown, and Company. 2011. Pages 131-132.

ARTICLE: "Sharman Takes Long View of the Lakers" - The LA Times - Jun 17, 1982

HOW ACCURATE IS THIS ACCOUNT OF PAT RILEY'S EARLY REIGN?

It's hard to overstate the impact of Pat Riley on the NBA. Counting this past year with the Heat, he has been involved in nearly one quarter of ALL NBA FINALS (19 of 77).

Yet his coaching career was nearly grounded before take-off. After initially performing well after taking over from Westhead (the team won 17 of 20 games), the Lakers soon began to struggle. Over the next two months, they lost 14 of 32 games. And Riley admits he didn't have a clue how to remedy the situation. He had kept parts of Westhead's System, but turned the team loose to run-and-gun as they first had under Jack McKinney. What he wanted was what he called 'Showtime' basketball.

But it was clear that the team's initial post-Westhead momentum had ground to a halt. With the support of Buss, who told Riley not to be afraid to coach, Pat finally laid down the law – in a come-to-Jesus meeting that took place largely as depicted: fed up with his team's poor performances, and constant finger-pointing, Riley got in each guy's face - even Kareem's. He put his foot down, itemizing for every player what he was doing wrong, or wasn't doing at all. Riley had now earned his team's respect. By all accounts, it was after this the winning ways returned.

As for his big roster move? It was indeed Pat Riley who mixed things up by benching West's new acquisition, Bob McAdoo, and starting in his place the relatively unknown Kurt Rambis. Rambis' ability to kick-start the fast break added a new gear to the already lightning-fast Lakers. It was, in many ways, the final building block of Showtime.

And just as his coaching style underwent a change – from a player’s pal to a drill sergeant - so did his look. Riley finally transformed himself into a style icon, donning Armani suits and slicked back hair. It was a look that made him the first ‘star coach,’ a sex symbol, and landed him on the cover of G.Q.

FUN FACT: Michael Douglas has since claimed that Riley’s style was the inspiration for his Gordan Gekko character in *Wall Street*.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; Rich Levin. *Magic*. Viking Adult. 1983. Pages 117-119, 168-170.

ARTICLE: “Living the Life of Riles Isn’t All That Easy” - The LA Times - April 26, 1982

WAS THIS REALLY THE ORIGIN OF “BEAT LA!”?

You bet! The famous chant began in a game of which the Lakers were not even playing...

It took place, as depicted, when the 76ers were finishing off the Boston Celtics in Game 7 of the 1982 Eastern Conference Finals – in front of a packed crowd at Boston Garden. The 76ers, not their beloved Celtics, were about to advance to face the Lakers in the Finals. But proving that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Boston fans spontaneously began to chant – urging Philly to “Beat LA!” And they haven’t stopped since... In fact, the cheer has spread to every arena in the country. Today, even fans of the Lakers have employed the chant ironically when playing the L.A. Clippers in the downtown L.A. arena they both share.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

ARTICLE: “Lakers Able to Win Games - Not Friends” - The LA Times - May 30, 1982

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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