

HBO ORIGINAL

WINNING TIME

— THE RISE OF THE LAKERS DYNASTY —



COMPANION GUIDE
Season 2 Episode 6

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 206.

ANOTHER SWEEP?

Yep. While the subject of sweeps are fresh—and sore—in the minds of Lakers fans, they may remember that the team was indeed swept by the 76ers in the 1983 Finals. Norm's struggles are depicted faithfully: he was banged up and could not manage to contain Andrew Toney.

But he was not alone in having a poor series: Houston center Moses Malone proved to be the single worst matchup of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's illustrious career. For his part, Malone was merely fulfilling a prediction he made early in the playoffs, that his team would sweep each round by going: "Fo' fo' fo'." Meaning the Sixers would win four games straight, every time. He came up one game short, as the team blazed through the post season with a 12 - 1 record.

While Kareem and Norm took the brunt of the public criticism, the sweep embarrassed the whole Lakers franchise. Management agreed that changes needed to be made.

Pearlman describes Norm's difficulties in *Showtime*:

It hardly helped that Nixon suffered a separated left shoulder in the opening minutes of the first game—the result of a violent collision with Toney. As he walked off the floor, Nixon was asked by Riley whether he needed a rest. 'No,' he replied, 'a casket' (Pg. 215).

Pearlman also talks about the aftermath of the fateful series:

Had the Lakers dropped a close seven-game series, perhaps the team could remain largely un-changed. The finals, though, were embarrassing, and served to reveal Riley's club as flawed and a bit old. 'We need to reassess,' West said. 'That's what it came down to' (Pg. 218).

More from Pearlman on the urgency of adjusting the roster:

In the aftermath of the series, Buss, West and Riley met multiple times to plan the next stage. There was a fine line in the NBA, one that divided perennial contenders from flukes and wannabes. Unless Los Angeles made some changes, there was no reason to believe the team wouldn't drift off into mediocrity. Such was the power of aging and the status quo (Pg. 218).

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: Riley, Pat. *The Winner Within*. Berkley Books. 1994. Pages 83-84.

ARTICLE: "The Mellowing of Abdul-Jabbar" - The York Dispatch - Oct 29, 1983

WEBSITE: https://www.basketball-reference.com/teams/LAL/1983_games.html

WEBSITE: https://www.cleveland.com/livingston/2015/04/injuries_in_play-offs.html

IS THE RED/BIRD SCENE IN THE GARDEN BASED IN REALITY?

The scene between Red Auerbach and Larry Bird is a dramatization of Bird's frustrations that the reigning champion Celtics had fallen short and failed to make the Finals. He was desperate for a chance to finally avenge his college loss to Magic. As he describes in his co-written memoir, *When the Game was Ours*, Bird relates that, "[i]t was his fervent wish to battle Magic and LA head-to-head for the title," but even after four seasons, that hadn't happened.

Bird has since admitted that he kept constant tabs on Magic and the Lakers, acutely aware of what his rival was accomplishing—although he rarely acknowledged it.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Bird, Larry. Magic Johnson. Jackie MacMullan. *When the Game Was Ours*. Mariner Books. 2009. Pages 115-116.

WAS KAREEM'S MANAGER REALLY NAMED TOM COLLINS?

Despite sharing a name with a popular cocktail, Kareem's manager, Tom Collins, was a real dude. In an article for the *Rutland Daily Herald*, he publicly referred to himself as Kareem's "Great White Knight." Yet Collins was unable to slay the dragon of free agency...

After the loss to Philadelphia in the fourth and final game of the NBA championship, Kareem became a free agent. He remained unsigned for three months. While Kareem received some interest from the Hawks, Bulls and Pacers, no formal offers materialized. Eventually, Kareem signed a new contract with the Lakers in September 1983 for \$1.5 million a year—\$500,000 less than he originally asked.

The Hattiesburg American quotes Collins about the stress of the negotiations saying, "It's been a long summer," in response to Kareem reducing his asking price from \$2 million to \$1.8 million, the Atlanta Hawks making an informal offer of only \$1.5 million, and the Chicago Bulls and Indiana Pacers staying silent.

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

BOOK: Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem; Mignon McCarthy. *Kareem*. Random House. 1990.

ARTICLE: "Kareem Staying in LA" - *The Hattiesburg American* - Aug 27, 1983

ARTICLE: "The Bargaining begins for Kareem" *The Miami News* - June 2, 1983

ARTICLE: "Agent Says Players Need Heroes" - *Rutland Daily Herald* - Sept 11, 1983

DID THE LAKERS REALLY TRADE NORM ON HIS BIRTHDAY?

Sadly, yes. Norm was now a dreaded Clipper. On his birthday.

Though we don't know if Magic was consulted about trading Norm to the Clippers, he had been consulted (and agreed to) trading Norm for David Thompson in 1981.

In Westhead's telling in *The Speed Game*, he recounts Buss previously consulting Magic about trading Norm for David Thompson when Magic was recuperating from his knee surgery. Westhead explained that Buss thought Magic would know best about the team chemistry if they traded Norm, Magic wouldn't have to share his position. However, Westhead thought it was a bad idea asking for Magic's advice that involved a teammate.

In any case, the Lakers made the trade announcement on October 10, 1983—the day before Norm's 28th birthday. He was unhappy about being traded. As were many Lakers fans, including Jack Nicholson. His teammates held a birthday party for Norm, where he bid them an emotional farewell.

On the all's-well-that-ends-well front, Norm went on to marry Debbie Allen in 1984. West describes the decision to trade Norm in his book, *West by West*. Acknowledging that he was hard on the players, West explained that he needed to resolve the tension between Magic and Norm. The team needed Magic to be the starting point guard, but when Norm stepped in to cover for Magic when he was out recovering from his knee injury, Norm couldn't easily transition the ball back to Magic when he returned. Because of that, it was very clear to all that Norm was unhappy.

Pearlman discusses potential changes in the lineup in *Showtime*:

The Lakers weren't going to rid themselves of Abdul-Jabbar (he was a free agent, but resigned for \$3 million over two years), Johnson or Worthy. At age thirty, Jamaal Wilkes's game was slipping, as was his market value. Kurt Rambis interested no one. 'It made sense to look into dealing Norman,' said West. 'He was a terrific player. I've never said he wasn't. But we were lacking balance, and we needed someone in the backcourt who didn't need the ball all the time, someone who was a better defender and a better shooter.' Put differently: Nixon was a pain in the rear, approaching his twenty-eighth birthday, struggling with tendinitis in his knees and not quite as explosive as he had once been. Plus, Johnson was tired of him (Pg. 218).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

BOOK: West, Jerry; Jonathan Coleman. *West by West*.

Little, Brown, and Company. 2011. Kindle edition. Page 153.

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. Pages 200-201.

ARTICLE: "The Cornbread Mix" - Daily News - Sept 9, 1983

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

NOW, ABOUT THAT PROPOSAL FROM MAGIC TO COOKIE...

Magic proposed to Cookie multiple times, the first time in 1985. We've moved the timeline up by several months.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

BOOK: Johnson, Magic; William Novak. *My Life*. Random House. 1992. Kindle edition. Loc 4099.

DID KAREEM'S HOUSE BURN DOWN?

Unfortunately, it did. In January 1983, Kareem's Bel-Air mansion burned to the ground in an electrical fire, destroying many of his cherished worldly possessions—including his priceless collection of jazz LPs. We've adjusted the timeline slightly, setting this in September 1983.

Following the fire, Kareem received jazz records and other gifts from fans. According to his memoir, “It was like Frank Capra’s classic film *It’s a Wonderful Life*.” It was this outpouring of love that prompted him to reconsider his relationship with the public—opening his heart. Though his locker room speech is dramatized, Kareem acknowledges it was the fire that helped him channel his energy back into the game. In reality, the night of the fire, the Lakers played the Celtics—in Boston. They lost 110-95.

Pearlman describes the tragic incident in *Showtime*:

The center could deal with the loss of the structure itself. What crushed him, however, was the incineration of his three prized collections oriental rugs, irreplaceable Middle Ages Qur’ans and more than three thousand jazz albums. ‘My record collection,’ he said, ‘was probably the single most important thing that was destroyed’ (Pg. 206).

The Show by Roland Lazenby tells of how this incident transformed Kareem’s relationship with the public:

‘Kareem was showered with a lot of love and a lot of heartfelt concern for the first time in his entire career,’ Riley said. ‘I don’t think he had ever seen that before’ (Pg. 221).

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

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

BOOK: Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem; Mignon McCarthy. *Kareem*. Random House. 1990.

BOOK: Lazenby, Roland. *The Show: The Inside Story of the Spectacular Los Angeles Lakers in the Words of Those Who Lived It*. McGraw Hill. 2005.

BOOK: Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem; Peter Knobler; *Giant Steps: The Autobiography of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar*. Bantam Books. 1983.

KAREEM BECAME THE NBA ALL-TIME SCORING LEADER

Life comes full circle. Earlier this year, current Laker LeBron James broke Kareem’s all-time scoring record. Kareem set that record on April 5, 1984. And just as the scene depicts, reporters and fans swarmed the arena floor. Riley broke into tears. High fives were slapped in the huddle and the stands. Kareem’s parents watched him break the record from the stands.

CHECK OUT THIS SOURCE:

ARTICLE: “Abdul-Jabbar Hits Jackpot With Sky Hook in Las Vegas” - The LA Times - April 6, 1984

DID BUSS ACTUALLY GET SUED FOR BIGAMY?

Yes. Though the character of Honey Kaplan is fictional, two of Buss's exes—Veronica Buss and Marsha Lee “Puppi” Osborne—sued him following their breakup. Both hired famous divorce attorney Marvin Mitchelson.

Veronica sued for half of Buss's holdings on the grounds of bigamy and fraud because Buss's divorce from his 'ex-wife' JoAnn had never been finalized—and was not made official for a full eight years following his marriage to Veronica.

As for Mitchelson's quip about being willing to settle for Magic and Kareem? While we don't know if he ever spoke the words to Buss directly, he said it to the press.

Mitchelson is quoted in an *LA Times* article as saying, “I think (\$25 million) is a conservative request....I may amend my complaint later to add more... [but], I'd settle for [Lakers superstars] Magic [Johnson] and Kareem [Abdul Jabbar] and \$20 million.”

CHECK OUT THESE SOURCES:

ARTICLE: “Lakers Owners Wife Sues to Annul ‘Bigamous’ Marriage” - The LA Times - April 15, 1983

ARTICLE: “\$25-million Palimony Suit Filed Against Lakers’ Owner Jerry Buss - The LA Times - July 9, 1987

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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