

The Huffster: Regarding the Lakers

Written by Stacey Hough, Columnist
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The 2012-2013 Los Angeles Lakers have been quite the hot topic for the past few months. Beginning with the firing of then coach Mike Brown after only a handful of games, through injuries (Steve Nash, Dwight Howard in particular) the hiring of Mike D'Antoni, and up to this point in the season, a chemistry experiment gone south. There are many theories as to why the Lakers record seems to not add up to the sum of the parts on the roster. Let's examine here, the four principle components most often discussed as possible causes of the disappointing state of affairs.

Kobe Bryant - Pros: Consummate scorer, 5-time champion, iron will.

Cons: Shoots too much at times, can be difficult to play with for some.

Dwight Howard - Pros: Maybe the most athletic center in the league when healthy, 3-time Defensive Player of the year. Cons: Hasn't really won anything, has struggled with getting along with coaches, immaturity issues.

Mike D'Antoni (Coach) - Pros: Offensive coaching success, has won in the NBA before, with Phoenix. Cons: His up-tempo offensive system seems a bad fit for the slow and aging Lakers, doesn't seem to focus on defense enough, and has been resistant to change during his coaching career.

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Jim Buss (Front office/ownership) - Pros: Has been very involved with player movement, and aggressively went after Steve Nash to help the team. Cons: Doesn't seem to have a plan, botched the firing of Mike Brown/D'Antoni hiring and drew major criticism for embarrassing Phil Jackson in the process. Also, Jim Buss has made GM Mitch Kupchak, who has been a successful GM, look like a bit of a puppet.

The easy person to point at for the casual fan is Kobe Bryant, who has been a lightning rod for blame since he became a Laker. But a look at the stats would suggest that Bryant has been the one consistent positive for the team all season. Leading the league in scoring at the age of 34, Bryant is still the go-to guy for the Lakers. He has taken a lot more shots than anyone else on the team, and in the league, for that matter. But with Nash and Howard missing huge time with injuries, there aren't too many options on the roster. And the roster issues are where the other three possible culprits come to light. This roster was largely assembled by Jim Buss, and it is a puzzle, which pieces do not fit. Howard and Pau Gasol can't seem to function together well on the court. Gasol is a multiple-time All-Star whom has been benched in the fourth quarter of some games, and taken out of the starting lineup at times altogether. Knowing what pieces to assemble is the job of the person putting together the team. That's a failure on the part of Jim Buss, who seems bent upon constructing the team in a way that only he sees fit. Hiring D'Antoni, after publicly flirting with 11-time Championship Coach Phil Jackson, has been a failure, for two reasons. The off-court reason is that the Laker fans were teased for a weekend of speculation, that Jackson would be offered the job. Then to have the announcement come that D'Antoni was given the job before Jackson had a chance to consider, was akin to whetting the fan base's appetite with steak, and substituting bologna at the last minute. No disrespect to D'Antoni, but 11 titles to 0 is about as steak and bologna as you get in a coaching comparison. That's a bad public relations move. The on-court reason that the hire is a failure is that D'Antoni's system, as stated above, doesn't match the slow-footed roster the Lakers employ. Also, D'Antoni has made Pau Gasol, All-Star, 2-time champion, into a 7-foot tall bench-warmer/decoy very often. The Buss-D'Antoni marriage, though clearly not working, may have to continue because the team is still paying the deposed Mike Brown 10 mil, and would owe D'Antoni a cool 12 mil if they fire him.

Then there is Dwight Howard, the soon-to-be free agent center that the Lakers have gambled upon in a big way. The Lakers acquired Howard, coming off of back surgery, and with him publicly saying that he really wanted to play in Brooklyn. They gambled that the city of LA, the tradition of winning and of dominant big men (Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem-Abdul Jabbar, Shaquille O'Neal) would be enough to sway the athletic big man to sign with the Lakers after his contract expires after the season. The winning hasn't happened this season as of yet, Howard has been hurt, and he doesn't seem to enjoy playing with Kobe. The media, and even Howard, hint at issues between Howard and Kobe relating to shot attempts. But it is entirely possible that the two could never see eye-to-eye because Dwight Howard doesn't take criticism well, and does not particularly seem to be title-driven either. That approach is never going to sit well with Kobe Bryant, nor for the Laker fandom for that matter. The folks in LA expect championships

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from their purple and gold team. The formula is not in place at this time for a championship.

Jim Buss is ultimately responsible for the muddled state of things in Lakerland. He's trying to put his stamp on the team that his father ran for so long, to great runs of success. Dr. Jerry Buss raised banners in the Kareem-Magic era, The Shaq-Kobe era, and the Kobe-Pau-Bynum era. Since Jim Buss has taken over, Phil Jackson has left the team and subsequently been embarrassed, Bynum is gone, Lamar Odom gone, Magic Johnson has broken his long-time affiliation with the franchise. Also worth mentioning is the fact that Kareem, the NBA's all-time leading scorer, had to almost beg for a statue outside the arena. And a good young potential coach Brian Shaw doesn't even get an interview for the job, possibly due to his ties to Jackson. It's as if anything from the elder Buss' run has been erased.

As this is being written, the Lakers sit in the 10th spot in the Western Conference, which is two spots away from making the playoffs. Mike D'Antoni said in a recent interview that he felt that the players were playing as hard as they could. Which would indicate, in that case, that the problem lies with how the team is constructed(a Jim Buss issue), and how they are asked to play(a Mike D'Antoni issue). It appears that, though the players have to execute and be accountable to a point, ultimately the folks trying to force square pegs into round holes are most culpable. The coach's system hasn't ever won a title, and won't win one in Los Angeles. The acting owner is driving his dad's franchise over a cliff. Regarding the Lakers, it's time for Jim Buss to put himself and his ego in the backseat, bring in someone who knows NBA basketball (like possibly bringing Jerry West back in as a consultant) and hand over the keys.