

A Hollywood ending for Tinseltown Lakers

By Chris Sheridan
The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Like Magic, Wilt and Kareem before them, Shaq and Kobe can now be described with just one word: Champions.

After so many years of coming up short, after hearing so much about weaknesses and unfulfilled potential, Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant won their first NBA championship Monday night.

In an exciting fourth quarter that ended Larry Bird's coaching career, O'Neal and Bryant led the Lakers to a 116-111 victory over the Indiana Pacers in Game 6 of the NBA Finals for the franchise's first title since 1988.

O'Neal scored 41 points, marking the third time he scored 40 or more in this series, and Bryant had 26 including four free throws that clinched it in the final 13 seconds.

"We finally got a championship and it feels great," Bryant said.

O'Neal was the unanimous choice for MVP of the series, adding to his MVP awards from the regular season and All-Star game.

The victory gave coach Phil

Jackson his seventh title — his first without Michael Jordan — in just his first season coaching a Lakers team that had been ousted from the playoffs in each of the first three seasons since O'Neal and Bryant arrived.

O'Neal, 28, and Bryant, 21, hugged on the court after the final buzzer, and O'Neal was mobbed as he tried to leave the court. With his exit blocked, he turned around and headed to the center court to receive the championship trophy.

As long as he worked to get to this point, it was only fitting that he stayed to get his rewards.

It was the 12th title in franchise history for the Lakers, the seventh since they moved to Los Angeles in 1960. Magic Johnson, Kareem-Abdul Jabbar and Wilt Chamberlain had earned the Lakers' previous titles, and this starstruck city had been anxiously awaiting the next one — especially since the 7-foot-1, 330-pound unstoppable force arrived from Orlando in 1996.

Even though they trailed for most of the first three quarters against a better shooting, more experienced opponent, the Lakers were the better team down

the stretch.

Indiana tied the game at 103-103 on a 3-pointer by Jalen Rose with 5:04 left, but that was the beginning of the end.

Robert Horry, who won his third career title, hit a leaner from the lane, and Ron Harper, who won his fourth, stole the ball on the Pacers' next possession.

O'Neal hit a soft 10-footer from the baseline, Rose missed on a drive and Bryant calmly sank a 20-footer, bobbing and weaving and whistling ever so slightly as he sauntered back to the bench and Indiana called timeout with 3:28 left.

The Pacers then went to the Hack-a-Shaq defensive strategy, sending O'Neal to the line four times in a span of 21 seconds. He missed three of them before Jackson took him out with 2:27 left.

When O'Neal returned with 1:56 left, the Lakers' lead was down to 110-107 and Indiana had the ball. Austin Croshere was fouled with 1 second left on the shot clock. He made both to make it a one-point game.

Glen Rice answered with two free throws, Croshere airballed a turnaround jumper, Bryant turned a drive and Miller rushed

a long 3-pointer and missed.

Bryant then was isolated at the top of the key and was hacked on a drive. He calmly made both free throws with 13 seconds left for a 114-109 lead.

Dale Davis dunked for Indiana to make it a three-point game with 5.4 seconds left, but Bryant again went to the line and calmly sank two more to clinch it.

As he walked to the bench, he pointed to his ring finger, the one that will soon be adorned with a championship ring.

Purple and gold confetti streamed down from the rafters as owner Jerry Buss addressed the fans and commissioner David Stern presented O'Neal with his trophy.

O'Neal held it aloft in his massive left arm and waved it to the crowd.

"I want to thank Phil Jackson, the real coach of the year," O'Neal said. "I want to thank you all for believing in us. We're going to get one next year, too," he said.

O'Neal shot 19-for-32 from the field and grabbed 12 rebounds, while Bryant had 10 rebounds and four assists to buffer an 8-for-27 shooting performance.

Rice added 16 for the Lakers, who outscored Indiana 37-27 in the fourth quarter.

Rose had 29, Miller 25 and Davis 20 for the Pacers, whose quest for the franchise's first NBA title came up short. In the end, they simply couldn't keep up with the energy the Lakers got from a crowd that waited 12 years for this moment.

For much of the game, it looked like that party wouldn't happen until Game 7 Wednesday night — or maybe not at all.

The Lakers repeatedly whittled down deficits and got within one, only to watch the Pacers charge back ahead. But when Los Angeles made yet another charge early in the fourth and finally took the lead, it was the Pacers who had to play from behind.

That'll be the next test for the Lakers, to see if they can build a dynasty to replace Jordan and the Bulls.

For now, though, it's one title — the one O'Neal and Bryant have been waiting so long to win.

Their playoff run included a stunning comeback from a late 16-point deficit to defeat the Portland Trail Blazers in Game 7 of the Western Conference finals.

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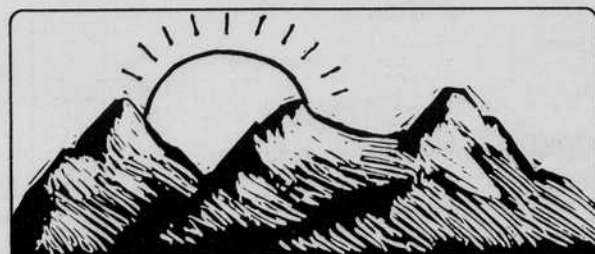
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