



# Metro/Sports

When he was 21, it was a very good year

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For 21-year-old Kobe Bryant, it's been a very good year.

The charismatic youngster became a multimillionaire, a pro basketball team owner, a repeat NBA All-Star, and he made the subtle but significant leap from sports star to superstar status with his supreme confidence and floating, flashy moves on the basketball court. His celebrity status has perhaps tripled in the past year, Bryant admits. He doesn't seem to mind that he has, in four years, gone from being a carefree high school kid in Ardmore, Pa., to being one of the most recognized individuals in America.

"It comes with the territory," he said during a visit to Dodger Stadium to throw out the ceremonial first pitch. "I enjoy it. Absolutely."

Perhaps the most significant events of his 21st year will be the ring he got and the one he's about to get.

Less than two weeks ago, the youngest Los Angeles Lakers who made his pro debut when he was 18, earned an NBA championship ring, something many NBA greats go an entire career without savoring.

While Lakers teammate Shaquille O'Neal clearly was the league MVP, a strong case could be made for Bryant as the second MVP during the postseason, when he flourished.

If Bryant had not taken charge in the fourth quarter of Game 7 of the Western Conference finals, leading the Lakers back from a 15-point deficit against Portland, they would not have had the chance to win the league title.

Then there was Game 4 of the NBA Finals, when Bryant, on crutches with an ankle sprain two days earlier, scored 28 points against Indiana, including going 4-for-4 in overtime and making the deciding basket with 5.9 seconds remaining after O'Neal fouled out with 2:33 left.

If there was any doubt, Bryant's performance in that 120-118 win for a commanding 3-1 series lead proved that he was grown up as an NBA player. When O'Neal fouled out, "Kobe winked at me and said, 'Don't worry about it. I got it,'" Shaquille said.

Coach Phil Jackson, who had seen Michael Jordan take similar control of games so many times in Chicago, said: "Kobe smelled it at the end of the game — and lifted us."

The day before that game, Bryant displayed his sparkling sense of humor when, asked if there was anything that could keep him from playing against the Pacers, he darted his eyes around, grinned and said, "Any snipers in the room?"

Earlier in the playoffs, Bryant also put the Lakers in command against Phoenix, sinking an off-balance, fallaway jumper with a defender all over him with 2.6 seconds left, for the difference in a 97-95 win and a 2-0 series lead.

All that was a very different Bryant from previous seasons, when he seemed to throw up airballs with important games on the line.

Then there's the other ring he plans to slip on, a wedding band. Last month, Bryant became engaged to Vanessa Laine, an 18-year-old high school student in Huntington Beach, Calif.

He said no wedding date was set, but that it would be this summer and that he and his bride might honeymoon in Italy, where he grew up while his father Joe was playing in a pro league. Kobe, who signed a six-year contract extension worth almost \$71 million with the Lakers last year, bought a half-interest in

## Blazers hope to re-sign Grant

ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Portland Trail Blazers said they will "work very hard" to re-sign Brian Grant, but his agent said Friday that the team's crowded roster might force the forward to look elsewhere.

Agent Mark Bartelstein notified the team Friday that Grant intends to become a free agent, giving up a guaranteed \$40 million over the next four years. Grant exercised an "out" clause in the contract he signed in 1997, which was to pay him \$56 million over seven years.

Bartelstein said Grant would like to re-sign with the Blazers, but that it might not be the best option for the team and Grant, especially considering Rasheed Wallace's emergence at power forward this season.

"Nobody should read into this that Brian doesn't want to remain a Blazer," Bartelstein said. "It's simply an opportunity to take a look at the landscape. He loves it in Portland, he loves his teammates, and he thinks they were close to winning a championship this year."

"Brian is healthy and he thinks he can be a great asset to this team, but there are a lot of forwards on the team. Brian is an All-Star caliber guy, and maybe there's a scenario that would work for him and the team, whether it's through a sign-and-trade or something like that. Certainly, the Blazers are a very viable option."

Grant missed 19 games because of knee and foot injuries, losing his starting power forward job to Wallace, who went on to make the Western Conference All-Star team for the first time.

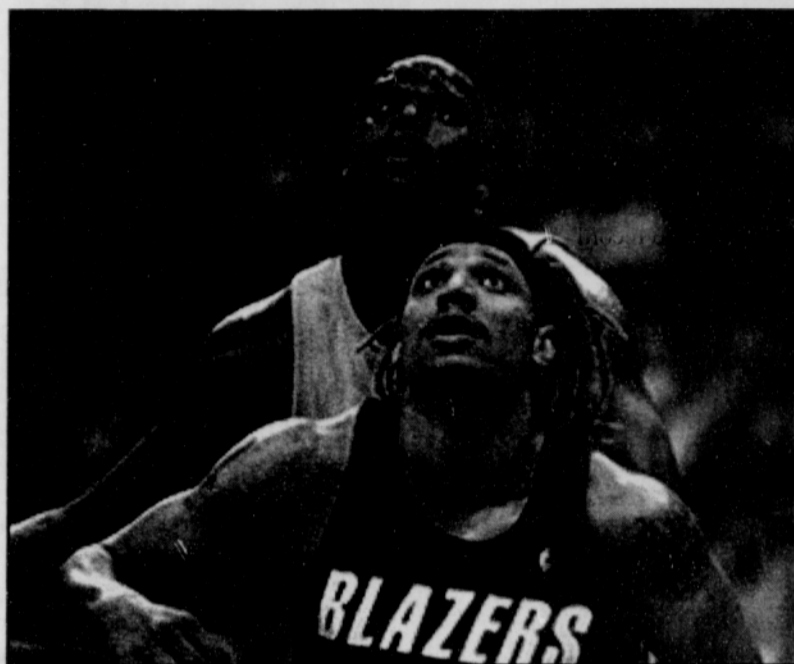
Grant's numbers declined sharply, from 11.5 points and 9.8 rebounds in 1999 to 7.3 and 5.5 this season. Against

the Los Angeles Lakers in the Western Conference finals, Grant's role diminished even further because he couldn't stay out of foul trouble guarding Shaquille O'Neal.

Although the injuries noticeably decreased his running and jumping abilities, other teams should show interest in the 6-foot-9, 260-pound rebounder. The Lakers, pushed to a Game 7 by the Blazers before beating Indiana for the NBA title, would love to have Grant take the place of A.C. Green, who was waived on Wednesday.

Grant would almost certainly have to take a big pay cut to join the Lakers, but he would be a starter again and get to play for the team favored to win the title.

The Blazers, wary of losing Grant to their Pacific Division rivals, hope to



quickly work out a deal when teams begin negotiating with free agents Saturday.

"We want Brian back and will work to re-sign him," Blazers president and general manager Bob Whitsitt said. "He has been an important piece of the puzzle, and we will work very hard to keep him in Portland."

Grant was scheduled to make about \$8.5 million next season. As a veteran with six years of NBA experience, Grant is eligible to make \$9 million in the first year of a contract. The Blazers could offer him a maximum of \$86 million over seven years.

*The question on everyone's mind is, Will Brian Grant resign with Portland, after opting out of his contract on Thursday?*

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