FOREWORD BY TEX WINTER

THE SHOW

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE SPECTACULAR

LOS ANGELES LAKERS

IN THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO LIVED IT

ROLAND LAZENBY

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Dedicated to the memory of Jean Lowry Bloomfield,
who enriched my life beyond imagination.

FOREWORD

Tex Winter

The history of the Lakers organization features a lineup of the biggest names in the game. It begins with George Mikan and runs through Shaquille O'Neal. In between it showcases the likes of Elgin Baylor, Jerry West, Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Magic Johnson, Kobe Bryant, and a host of supporting talent.

Mikan, of course, was the game's first dominant center for the old Minneapolis Lakers. He was quite awkward, actually, but his advantage in the league's early years was a lane that was only six feet wide. He used to set up position in close and go to work on opponents that had no idea how to stop him.

I've mused a few times in recent years what Shaq would do with a six-foot lane. Each possession would be a point-blank situation. Game over. Literally. I'm not sure the NBA itself could have survived such an unstoppable force in those early years. As it was, the league barely survived Mikan.

The Lakers are the kind of club that invites such speculation because of this great assemblage of talent. They have been alive and kicking as a franchise for the better part of six decades, briefly first in Detroit, then in Minneapolis, and finally at home in Southern California. It's a period that coincides with my own tenure in the game, a coaching career that has covered most of six decades.

In that time, the game itself has undergone an amazing transformation. In the old days, it was usually entertaining, but as it changed basketball became entertainment. The Lakers, particularly the Los Angeles edition of the franchise, have always been at the vanguard of that movement.

Even before the Lakers moved westward, the NBA was a players' league, a star-driven operation. The individual player in the NBA has always held a value above team play. That's because the early NBA owners found they could survive if they sold fans on the idea of stars. Certainly the Minneapolis Lakers had their share in Mikan and Jim Pollard and Vern Mikkelsen.

From the early sixties, when West and Baylor led the transplanted Lakers in L.A., the connection with Hollywood and its supply of celebrities only served to amp up the equation. Then Jerry Buss bought the team in 1979 and brought with him his ideas about Showtime and fast-break basketball, powered by more stars than ever. To me, that remains the most remarkable facet of the entire Lakers phenomenon. Despite all the Hollywood influences, the egos, and the drama, the franchise has always managed to get and keep great stars. Buss's vision wouldn't have been possible without the unique abilities of Magic Johnson, this six-nine guard with such great vision and passing style.

Not only was he a star, Magic made others stars, too. Suddenly Hollywood embraced Lakers games as sort of a community lovefest. Everyone in town wanted to see the Magic parade, and with good reason. The Showtime Lakers were as fine a running team as has ever been put on a basketball floor. They were so good and won so much that they set the cornerstone for the franchise. The Lakers became about winning, about Showtime basketball, about the fast break, about entertainment, about the Show.

And in some ways, they were all about individual basketball. That wasn't their blatant approach. Instead, it was an offshoot of the demand for star power. It was a league-wide thing, but the Lakers epitomized it.

But with their approach always came the persistent and troubling question: Where will we find the next star?

So the great individual talent is always the focus, the issue. And that makes it more difficult for Lakers coaches to establish a team concept. That basic conflict feeds that drama that the community and the media crave. That was at least part of the factor in the struggles of Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant. Certainly their conflicts had to do with basic personality differences as much as anything. But there's no question that the atmosphere in Hollywood magnifies the star pressures and every other element, too.

The situation made my coaching tenure in Los Angeles one constantly evolving challenge. When Phil Jackson and I were coaching the Chicago Bulls in the 1990s, we were always aware of the talented young Lakers teams with Shaq and Kobe. Even then, they had that Hollywood star status, that higher profile. But it was based on their potential, not on anything they had accomplished. They were nothing like our Bulls, but they did have their moments.

Then Phil Jackson brought his aura to the team with his reputation for having won six championships in Chicago. I remember when we as a coaching

staff arrived in Southern California, we were greeted by a sense of envy. With our six championships, we had something the Lakers wished they had. So the expectations were unbelievably high when we arrived in the fall of 1999.

Winning the championship that very first season was a storybook tale, complete with one of the most inspiring comebacks in the history of the sport in Game 7 of the Western Conference Finals against Portland. To be able to come through and realize those huge expectations in the 2000 playoffs was almost dreamlike. The team was never happier than in the wake of that first title. Then for us to forge our way to two more titles over the next two seasons went beyond even the craziest expectations. Unfortunately, the conflict that ultimately ravaged the team seems to have overshadowed our special accomplishments. Yet it's not hard to understand why I prefer to think of what our Lakers teams accomplished. It's my hope that in the long run, the big wins will outweigh the big drama, that fans will embrace the Shaq/Kobe era for what it achieved.

Part of that, of course, hinges on the next chapter of the Lakers story. Can the franchise reach again for the stars? What will the new plot twists bring? Those are the kinds of questions they love in Hollywood. While we're waiting for the plot to unfold, the pages of this book offer the chance to run back through the trials and tribulations of six decades of Lakers basketball. Quite often, a sense of the future can be found in the past. And I don't have to tell you, the Lakers are a team with a hell of a past.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

More than 500 interviews were recorded for this book over an 18-year period. Many subjects were interviewed over the past three years. Many other interviews were recorded during an assortment of history projects over the years. Several interview subjects have since died. It's hard to describe the immense privilege I feel at having been able to interview men such as George Mikan, Jim Pollard, Chick Hearn, Wilt Chamberlain, Jack Kent Cooke, Danny Biasone, and other giants on the pro basketball landscape. All of the interviews have been assembled here as a mosaic of perspectives on the history and evolution of the Lakers. I am deeply indebted to all who gave their time and consented to discuss their perspectives and answer my questions.

I owe a special debt to Jorge Ribeiro for his friendship and wisdom. I would like to thank Bob Schron, who conducted a dozen interviews for me. In addition, my editor and agent, Matthew Carnicelli, put in long hours in helping to prepare the manuscript for publication.

Once again I have pushed the patience of the publishing staff at McGraw-Hill, including Julia Anderson Bauer and Mark Weinstein, and once again I am most grateful for their efforts.

As always, my wife Karen and children Jenna, Henry, and Morgan provide the real joy in my life that makes my work possible. And I must not forget the new addition to the family, my grandson William Lowry "Buster" Jones.

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INTRODUCTION

The Lakers Aura

Even as their team won championships, Lakers fans came to tire of the circumstances. There was the game's overwhelmingly dominant center and the game's resplendent, high-flying, ultra-talented wing player, both seemingly caught in a constant snit over who should have the ball. And the newspapers were having a field day reporting their clashes.

Shaq versus Kobe, right?

Hardly.

We're talking about George Mikan, the pro game's first great center, and Jim Pollard, the original jumping jack, playmaking guard/forward. A half century before Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant chased their curious chemistry as Lakers teammates, Mikan and Pollard spent their careers with the old Minneapolis Lakers alternating between fighting over the ball and winning championships. They won six of them, in fact, including five NBA titles and one in the old National League. And they debated their chemistry every step of the way.

The bad news for O'Neal and Bryant is that four decades after Mikan and Pollard won their last title, they were still jawing over the issue in interviews for history books. It seems that these hoops conflicts run forever, or until the last sports talk radio show signs off.

As Tex Winter, the longtime observer of the game, explained, "That's basketball."

That's also the Lakers, the ultimate team in the history of the game. As the cover of this book declares, this is their story, told in their own words. Not surprisingly, it's a bit complicated.

There's a team plane crash in a snowstorm, at least two near financial failures, more than a few bewildering real estate transactions, a high-profile rape case, a low-profile indecent exposure case, an unsolved murder, the firings of several winning coaches, and enough sexual hijinks to qualify as a soap opera,

all of it occasioned in and around the team's 29 championship battles. As with any Hollywood epic, there's a star-driven cast. The manic Jerry West. The ebullient yet insatiable Magic Johnson. The brooding Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The dandy Chick Hearn. The splendid Elgin Baylor. The arrogant Jack Kent Cooke. The cunning Jerry Buss. The preening Pat Riley. The lonely Wilt Chamberlain. The childlike Shaq. The ambitious Kobe. The manipulative Phil Jackson. The leering Jack Nicholson. They and a phalanx of splendid role players over the decades all populate the mythical panorama that is the Los Angeles Lakers.

Just which of these is the leading man?

That depends on whom you ask.

BILL WALTON, HALL OF FAMER, FORMER UCLA STAR: "It's all Chick Hearn. I started playing basketball when I was eight years old in 1960, and we didn't have a television. I bought a $9.95 transistor radio and listened to Chick Hearn on the radio. Chick Hearn taught me how to play basketball, how to think about basketball. He taught me how to *love* basketball. I lived for Chick Hearn on the radio every day. Jerry and Elgin and all the guys. Rudy LaRusso. The endless list of characters. But it was always Chick. The love affair with basketball in Los Angeles and the Lakers is all about Chick Hearn. He is the guy who convinced so many millions of people that this is the greatest thing in the world. Once we came and saw what he saw we could never leave. While Chick broadcast 3,300 games, or whatever the number is, I'm sure I listened to at least 2,500 of those games. I planned my life around Chick Hearn. I would sit there as a young boy and just be amazed. I would listen to this game, and I could see it all. I would laugh out loud at the things Chick would say. At the end, in his last year I was listening to a game. I still was laughing out loud."

Others say it's got to be the long-tortured Jerry West, who came to the team in 1960 as a rookie out of West Virginia, starred for 14 years through a blur of unfulfilling championship battles, then stayed on as coach, consultant, and general manager for years. It could well be West's story, except that he doesn't want it to be.

MARK HEISLER, *LOS ANGELES TIMES* COLUMNIST: "The Lakers mystique is Jerry West. He's the one constant. He's the one guy who's been there from the beginning."

Jerry West: "I don't remember anything about my career. I choose not to. I really don't live in the past. I really don't care about the past."

Perhaps the largest of many ironies in West's life is that he is "the logo." His graceful, slashing silhouette is the centerpiece of the NBA's red, white, and blue logo, which means that, as much as he'd like to forget it, he and everyone else associated with the NBA is reminded of his playing career at virtually every turn. Quite simply, the NBA logo is plastered everywhere. And he's revered accordingly.

Mark Heisler: "They had a young PR guy who was just there for a year or so. And West was introducing himself. He said, 'I'm the logo.' And he was kidding. The thing is about West, in one way, he's tremendously humble and doesn't think he's done anything. There also another side of West where he knows he's Jerry Fuckin' West."

Jack McCallum, *Sports Illustrated* senior writer: "I told him, 'Growing up, you were the guy I sort of modeled myself after, like every white kid in America who had half a jump shot.' West, just totally without ego, looks at me and says, 'Yeah, a lot of guys have told me that.'"

J. A. Adande, *Los Angeles Times* columnist: "Before I moved back to L.A., I was working at the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. And I'd call him for stories I was working on. I'd get off the phone, and I'd think, 'I was talking to Jerry West.' I was born in 1970, so I don't remember his career. But he was always *Jerry West*. And again, even though I hadn't seen him play, I was somewhat in awe of him. He has that presence, that name. He used to come by my boys club. His son belonged to my boys club in Santa Monica when I was a kid, so when he was playing some of his biddy basketball games, he'd be in the stands. We'd say, 'There's Jerry West! There's Jerry West!'"

For others, the leading man is clearly Earvin "Magic" Johnson, who wept the first time he donned a Lakers uniform in 1979. In many ways, the Lakers franchise would be defined once and for all by Johnson's prodigious emotional gift, a vast store of unbridled enthusiasm that washed over L.A. like a great tide during the '80s and drowned what was long thought to be the city's unconquerable cynicism. Johnson's tenure would soon come to be labeled the

Showtime era. It didn't come until the team was already 30 years old, yet it proved to be the watershed for the franchise. His emotional energy, his performances, would connect the past and the future of the club, fusing the image of the Lakers across the decades. In so doing, he also managed to change the game itself.

Jim Hill, longtime L.A. sportscaster and Johnson confidant: "You could tell it was coming. You could see from the no-look passes, and you could see from Magic's enthusiasm. You could see when the Lakers would score and the opposition would call a time-out and the people were going crazy and Magic's hugging Jamaal Wilkes or somebody else. I remember the first time Jamaal did something and he called time-out. People were going crazy. Magic starts hugging and yelling at Jamaal and patting him on the back and giving high fives every place. Jamaal looked at him like he was crazy. Up to that point, if you were a professional, you were cool, calm, and collected. And you didn't show your emotions on the floor. And here was this 19-year-old kid running and laughing, just like he was on the playground."

Herb Williams, 17-year NBA veteran and former Lakers opponent: "Magic's thing was to get everybody else involved. And with him having the ball all the time, he would always be in rhythm. So his thing was always to pass the ball, lookin' for the open guy. And if he had to put a little flair behind it to get the crowd excited, he could do that also."

As the Showtime era progressed, it became clear that Los Angeles itself was donning a new image.

Jim Hill: "It was incredible. Going to watch the Lakers play became like going to watch a heavyweight fight 82 times a year. People dressed up. People were excited. People didn't know what was going to happen. Magic knew that when he went to the arena, he was going not only to win the game but to perform so that when people went to work the next day, they would say, 'Did you see what Earvin did last night?' He would always say that was what he wanted to do. He wanted make people talk about what he had done."

J. A. Adande: "He could walk into a restaurant and Warren Beatty or any other of the big Hollywood names would be in the restaurant, but all the eyes

would turn to Magic. He had that magnetism that L.A. responds to. He also reveled in it. He loved being the center of attention. The reason he was so successful in L.A., L.A. is all about a show, and he provided the show."

Jerry West: "He played the game with a joy but still had this enormous sense of competitive drive with him, an absolutely incredible leader even at that early stage of his life. He was just one of these unique players that made people better. You could just see it. No one had to tell you about it. No one had to write about it. You didn't have to wonder about it. He was a damn thoroughbred. When he was born, somebody did sprinkle a little extra dust on him."

J. A. Adande: "Magic had a way of making everybody feel they were a part of it. When I was a kid, I used to go to the games, and I met Magic at his basketball camp. I went to his summer camp four years in a row, so he got to know me through that. I'd show up at the games, and he'd break out of the layup line and come over and say hi to me. I was in fourth, fifth, sixth grade. And I felt like the most important guy at the Forum. Magic came over to talk to me in the middle of the layup line and everybody saw it. Then I proceeded to go back up to my seat in the upper colonnade section, but all the way back up I knew that everyone had seen that happen. He recognized what he did. He knew that coming over, that was gonna make my day."

Mike Wise, longtime NBA writer: "All of a sudden Magic shows up, and Showtime happens. And it's real. You went into the Forum on a Friday night, and if you were a visiting team, you didn't come out of that building a winner. Everybody knew that's just how it was. It wasn't just about Magic. It wasn't just about Kareem. It was about Showtime. There was an aura around the team that was somewhat bigger than the franchise itself. It's why the stars came out, it's why the town started singing Randy Newman after every game: 'I Love L.A.' It's a corny song, but if you were in L.A. and you were visiting and that song was playing after the game, you were like, 'Yeah. This is a great town.' And then all of sudden you go through this time in Los Angeles when you got Rodney King and you got O.J. and you have this earthquake and the town is in this big funk [for] five, ten years. And you're like, 'Wow, L.A.'s lost it. It's gone.' And then all of a sudden Jerry West gets Shaq and Kobe. You hate to say that getting two guys to become part of a franchise can resurrect

a city, but in a big way it was part of L.A.'s healing process. The Lakers then became part of something alive. You get a rental car at the airport, and the guy driving the Avis is like, 'Ah, the Lakers are playin' tonight.' It's a communal thing. L.A. is like this big car culture where you don't know your neighbors and everybody is driving around. But the Lakers made it a town. A small town. In that way, it's a really connected history."

Central to it all is the setting, Hollywood itself, and the team's succession of playing venues—the L.A. Sports Arena, the Great Western Forum, Staples Center—the stages on which the drama has played out season after season, each building taking on the atmosphere that is a Lakers game.

Darryl Dawkins, a.k.a. Chocolate Thunder, former NBA player: "It's Showtime. When you come to a Lakers game, it's gonna be star-studded. You get a chance to play harder than you've ever played. It's all about a show. If you ain't got a show, then stay out. That's just the way it is."

Kevin Willis, longtime NBA player: "It was that Showtime thing. All the stars came out at night. And the opposing team wanted to be a part of that, wanted to be involved in trying to slow that fast break down and watching Magic do his thing out there. It presented a challenge every time you played the Lakers in the Forum. Guys just loved it. It was an unbelievable atmosphere. It was like being on a stage. The only difference was, the stars were sitting and watching the athletes. You just loved that two-plus hours out there, doing your thing in front of everybody. Showcasing in front of everybody."

John Salley, humorist and former Laker: "When you walk in Staples, you're enamored by the stars. Jack is one of 'em, but to see Gary Shandling and Dustin Hoffman. You see all these people who take these front row seats. There are the people who you watch on TV or on film, or who you listen to musically. You're like in awe of them. And then the Lakers come out, and you find out that the real stars in Los Angeles are the Lakers. Because all the Hollywood stars are standing and clapping and literally setting their schedules around the Lakers. These are people making literally $20 and $30 million setting their schedules around what the Lakers do. The stars in this town are really the Lakers. Magic's got a star in Hollywood, and they had no choice but

to give it to him because he's the most famous star in all of Los Angeles. Period."

It's duly noted that the fans of the Boston Celtics might want to raise a point of contention. The Lakers are the ultimate team? What about the Celtics' 16 NBA titles outclassing the 14 won by the Lakers?

That's certainly a consideration, but let's do some math. Over their long history, the Lakers have played in the league championship series a record 28 times. Over the Celtics' even longer history, they've reached the championship round 19 times, trailing the Lakers as a distant second.

Then there's the issue of winning percentages. The Lakers hold the NBA's all-time lead in winning a whopping 62.1 percent of their regular-season games.

And when it comes to the playoffs, the Lakers again hold a large lead, having won 60.4 percent of their postseason contests. In fact, they've won 71 percent of their playoff series, a league-leading 93 playoff series won.

The Celtics? Again a distant second with 66 playoff series won.

As for consistency, the Lakers have won at least one title or made an appearance in the league championship Finals in every decade of the NBA's existence. They won two titles in the '40s (including their National League title); three titles in the '50s while making four championship appearances; six championship appearances in the '60s; a title and three championship appearances in the '70s; five titles and eight championship appearances in the '80s; a championship appearance in 1991; and three titles and four championship appearances in the first five seasons of the 21st century.

Despite this edge in the numbers, the Lakers over the years have taken a back seat to the Celtics in the minds of many NBA fans. That's because it's about much more than mere numbers.

Jerry Sichting, former Celtic: "The first year I came to Boston, the Celtics and Lakers played each other four times in the preseason. The second game was in the Forum. During that game, Maurice Lucas and Robert Parish got into it. Both benches emptied. I remember that when they began breaking it up, K. C. Jones was at the bottom of the pile and had Michael Cooper in a headlock. That's the first time I had ever seen an NBA coach in a fight with one of the players. But that was the Celtics and Lakers."

RICK TELANDER, *CHICAGO SUN-TIMES* COLUMNIST: "The Lakers/Celtics—that might have been the rivalry that built the NBA. Russell/Chamberlain, Bird/Magic. The Lakers are also defined by their foes. Certainly that Celtics rivalry was something that put them in everybody's consciousness."

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR: "I have a unique perspective on that. I've been going to NBA games since 1960 when I was in the eighth grade. I've seen a few things. The Lakers were always the noble opposition when I started going to see the games. And that was it. They couldn't beat the Celtics. I was a Celtics fan in those days. But the Lakers were always interesting to watch because of Jerry and Elgin. They went from being the loyal opposition to being a dominant team during the Showtime period. They're back being a dominant team now. Their history with George Mikan and Vern Mikkelsen and all those guys—that really gives them a cachet because before the Celtics started to dominate the Lakers were a dominant team."

DR. JACK RAMSAY, BROADCASTER AND FORMER NBA COACH: "I don't think anybody can match the Celtics in terms of mystique. They won eight championships in a row. They won 11 out of 13. But if you go back to the original Lakers in Minnesota, they won five and one in the old National League. That was a great team. That was a team like the Celtics. Then when the Lakers moved to Los Angeles, they were good, but they couldn't win for a long time because they were always playing the Celtics."

The Lakers' failures against the Celtics became the standard for basketball futility, and the spell wasn't broken until 1985, when Pat Riley coached Los Angeles past the Celtics for the league championship.

MARK HEISLER: "Pat Riley was the height of paranoia. When they were playing the Celtics in the '80s, one day he makes Gary Vitti dump the water because he's afraid that Red [Auerbach had] poisoned it. Riles gives the team a talk about what the Celtics really were—this ancient warlike race of subhumans. It was just incredibly demonizing. What it really is, it just goes to show how humiliated the Lakers felt by the Celtics over all those years. The Celtics were beating them every year, and the Lakers just felt terrible about it. It's hard to underestimate the damage done to the Lakers psyche by all those Celtics victories. The Celtics were incredibly good about rubbing it in. Every-