



Peggy Sirota

Style

Kobe Bryant Will Always Be an All-Star of Talking

He's old, he's wise, he's as ferocious as ever. And in this final phase of his brilliant, checkered, championship-laden career, the man who once called himself "the Valentino of the NBA" has been running his mouth like never before. This interview—the last one he gave before his season-ending injury in late January—was no exception.

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"I know who I am," is among the first things Kobe Bryant tells me, which is the kind of statement made only by people who are very, very right or very, very wrong. He tells me this in a breakfast café called Haute Cakes, tucked inside a strip mall in Newport Beach, California. We're fifteen minutes from his house, but I nonetheless mention that this is

not the kind of place I expected to meet him. “What did you expect,” he asks, “A dungeon?”

It’s the first Monday of January. Last night, Bryant hit a floater with 12 seconds on the clock to beat the struggling Indiana Pacers; tonight his team is in Portland, but he’s not traveling in order to rest his aging bones. Two days from today, he’ll go 2 of 12 against the Clippers as the Lakers fall 18 1/2; games out of first place in the Western Conference; two weeks after that, he’ll suffer a rotator-cuff injury that will end his season completely. This will be the most disheartening campaign of his 19-year career—he just doesn’t know it yet. I mentally prepare myself for a justifiably surly, potentially uncommunicative sociopath.

My assumptions are wrong.

He walks through the door at 8:40 am. Bryant, who has already been awake for three hours, is a few minutes late for our meeting (broadcaster Stuart Scott had died the day before, so Bryant needed to provide a eulogistic response for ESPN Radio). He sits with his back to the wall, wholly expressionless. My first question is unrelated to sports: On behest of *GQ*, I’m supposed to get Bryant’s feelings on the attention rivals like Russell Westbrook and Dwyane Wade receive for their fashion choices. Mildly amused, he notes that he now tries to be “less fashion forward” (he’s wearing camouflage pants as he says this) and that if he dressed like Westbrook (“skinny peddle pushers and low-cut sneakers with a polka-dotted shirt with glasses and a backpack”) it would be received as a practical joke. This spills into a banal discussion over branding*, which is not a subject I want to talk about. Knowing that Bryant has to leave the café by 10 o’clock, I decide to take a calculated risk: I tell him that there is no point in pretending we’re about to have a normal conversation, because nothing about this meeting is remotely normal. I just want to directly ask him all the things I’ve always wondered about his life. And from the moment I say this, I can tell that this is what he wants, too.

**Bryant views branding as a modern form of “storytelling.” I note that this comparison is only partially accurate, since branding is a form of storytelling with a conscious commercial purpose. “For some,” he concedes. “But that’s not a universal thing. That’s like saying every wizard within Slytherin House is a villain.”*



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Let's start in the middle: Bryant won five titles with Phil Jackson as his coach and three with Shaquille O'Neal as his teammate. Despite that success, both relationships are

largely defined by their complexity. It is widely assumed Shaq and Bryant are not friends, particularly after a 2008 incident in a New York nightclub when O'Neal performed an impromptu freestyle rap requesting that Kobe describe the flavor of his anus. Bryant's trajectory with Jackson has been more nuanced, but deeper and (at times) more painful. Though Jackson has said he views Bryant "like my son," he's also written damaging things about Kobe in multiple books, once classifying him as "uncoachable" and expressing a curious lack of surprise when Bryant was accused of rape in 2003.

Why do you think Jackson would write such negative things about you? Was he trying to psychologically motivate you, or is he just kind of a weird, arrogant person?

Well, most successful people are a little arrogant.... I was very stubborn. I was like a wild horse that had the potential to become Secretariat, but who was just too fucking wild. So part of that was him trying to tame me. He's also very intelligent, and he understood the dynamic he had to deal with between me and Shaq. So he would take shots at me in the press, and I understood he was doing that in order to ingratiate himself to Shaq. And since I *knew* what he was doing, I felt like that was an insult to my intelligence. I mean, I knew what he was doing. Why not just come to me and tell me that? Another thing was that I would go to him in confidence and talk about certain things, and he would then use those things to manipulate the media against me. And from that standpoint, I finally said, "No way. I'm not gonna deal with that anymore." This was during our first run, during those first three championships. So when he'd come out in the press and say those things about me, I was finally like, "Fuck it. I'm done with this guy. I'll play for him and win championships, but I will have no interaction with him." Yet at the same time, it drove me at a maniacal pace. Because either consciously or unconsciously, he put a tremendous amount of pressure on me to be efficient, and to be great, and to be great *now*.

When this was happening, did you actively dislike him?

Yeah. (*pause*) Yeah. I was like, "Fuck him. I'm out here busting my ass. I'm killing myself." And it became insulting. Because I chose to extend my deal with the Lakers to play with Shaquille O' Neal and win championships. I knew what I could have done individually. I could have gone to another team and averaged 35 points a game. I could have gone anywhere and *destroyed* people. I gave that up to win championships. So it was infuriating to hear people say I was selfish. It was very, very maddening.



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Do you feel like Shaq was publicly rewarded for not working hard? Somehow, the fact that he was a little lazy always came across as charming.

Well, he was [charming]. The perception of him was exactly that. Now it's not. The city of L.A. knows *me* now, and they know who I am. But at the time, the perception was that Kobe was trying to break up the team. That was wrong. I am a maniacal worker, and if you're not working as hard as I am, I am going to let you know about it. That's why Shaq and I still have a good relationship: He knows I have zero fear of him. I would tell him what he was doing and what he wasn't doing. And vice versa. There were times when we absolutely could not stand each other. We could not be in the same room together. But we challenged the shit out of each other.

So would you say the perception of him being lazy was inaccurate?

He had years where he was lazy. But during those three championships we won? To say he was a beast would be an understatement. To say I didn't learn things from him that I still use to this day would be a disservice. To be fair, I think what happened is that, as you get older, your body starts breaking down, and you have to really love the process in order to get through that. Like, right now, I hurt. My ankle joints, my knee joints. My back. My thighs are sore. But for him, with his big toe and his knee, it became very hard for him to get up in the morning and push through those things. He might not have been as willing to do those things at the time, and I wasn't thrilled about that.



The image of Bryant being less than “thrilled” with the not-so-maniacal work ethic of a teammate has become the center of his persona. Though he will never usurp the greatness

of Michael Jordan within the public consciousness, he has likely already surpassed MJ in terms of the terror and antipathy he instills in those who play alongside him. His legacy is littered with the corpses of slackers who could not match his commitment, particularly underachievers of unusual size (Dwight Howard, Andrew Bynum). It has become popular to suggest that his ego—and his two-year, \$48.5 million contract—are now actively hurting the franchise. The perception has become so universal that *ESPN The Magazine* published a story suggesting the Lakers cannot sign top-flight free agents as long as Bryant controls the system. Most of the story's sources were anonymous and Bryant claims he didn't read the article. But he also said he has been asked about it enough to “grasp what it was conceptually,” and he certainly doesn't dispute the takeaway.

“Does my nature make me less enjoyable to play with? Of course,” he says. “Of course it does. Is it possible that some top players in the league are intimidated by that? Yes. But do I want to play with those players? Does the Laker organization want those specific players? No. Magic. Jordan. Bird. We all would have been phenomenal teammates. This organization wants players who will carry this franchise to another five or six championships. The player who does that has to be cut from the same cloth. And if they're not cut from that cloth, they don't belong here.”

This self-perpetuating image of Bryant as an unyielding workaholic has become so integral to his ethos that it reflexively informs every other detail about his life. He has become The Last Hard Man, the realest of the real, the lone remnant from a Precambrian NBA era when players still hated each other and the only people who cared about AAU basketball were actual eighth graders. Yet people forget that this was not always the case. As crazy as it now seems, there was a long stretch in the '90s when the principle knock on Bryant was his alleged insincerity. He smiled constantly, spoke Italian, and took Brandy to the prom. He adopted a “plain vanilla” persona modeled after Julius Erving, despite a transparent aspiration to embody the most conventional definition of urban cool; it often came across like Grant Hill trying to impersonate Allen Iverson.

“It wasn't that people thought I was *soft*,” he says, slightly wincing at the implications of the word. “It was more of a street credibility thing: 'He grew up in Italy. He's not one of us.' But what I came to understand, coming out of Colorado, is that I had to be me, in the place where I was at that moment.”

Which brings us to the hinge-point in the career of Kobe Bryant: the week he checked into a Colorado hotel room, had sex with a woman who worked there, and was subsequently arrested on a sexual-assault charge. A year later, the charges were dropped and Bryant apologized. But the incident will (obviously) never go away. When Bryant dies, the

accusation will probably appear in the second paragraph of his obituary. And he knows this.

“I started to consider the mortality of what I was doing,” he says. At the time, he was 24. “What’s important? What’s not important? What does it mean when everybody loves you, and then everybody hates your guts for something they *think* you did? So that’s when I decided that—if people were going to like me or not like me—it was going to be for who I actually was. To hell with all that plain vanilla shit, just to get endorsement deals. Those are superficial, anyway. I don’t enjoy doing them, anyway. I’ll just show people who I actually am.... The [loss of the] endorsements were really the least of my concerns. Was I afraid of going to jail? Yes. It was twenty-five to life, man. I was terrified. The one thing that really helped me during that process—I’m Catholic, I grew up Catholic, my kids are Catholic—was talking to a priest. It was actually kind of funny: He looks at me and says, ‘Did you do it?’ And I say, ‘Of course not.’ Then he asks, ‘Do you have a good lawyer?’ And I’m like, ‘Uh, yeah, he’s phenomenal.’ So then he just said, ‘Let it go. Move on. God’s not going to give you anything you can’t handle, and it’s in his hands now. This is something you can’t control. So let it go.’ And that was the turning point.”

The reason Bryant needs to leave at 10 A.M. is because he’s working on a documentary for Showtime titled *Kobe Bryant’s Muse*. He seems exceedingly interested in filmmaking at the moment, so I ask if he’s seen *Whiplash*. “Of course,” he replies. *Whiplash* is about a psychotic music instructor (J. K. Simmons) who physically abuses and emotionally manipulates a self-driven jazz drummer (Miles Teller) until the teenage musician both collapses and succeeds. Thematically, the film suggests an idea that has been mostly erased from modern popular culture: the possibility that inhumane, unacceptable treatment is sometimes essential to the creation of genius. I ask Bryant what he thought of *Whiplash*. “That’s me,” he says, although I can’t tell if he means the Simmons character or the Teller character. He might mean the entire movie. In any case, he’s acutely aware of the draconian strangeness of his own personality and of the downside to his ambitions, two characteristics he views almost interchangeably.

Do you ever think that the qualities that make you great are actually problems?

Oh, yeah. But the things that make a person average are also problems. The things that make someone not good at anything at all are a problem. If you want to be the greatest of all-time at something, there’s going to be a negative side to that. If you want to be a high school principal, that’s fine, too—but that will also carry negative baggage.

So how much are you willing to give up? Have you given up the possibility of having friends? Do you have any friends?

I have “like minds.” You know, I’ve been fortunate to play in Los Angeles, where there are a lot of people like me. Actors. Musicians. Businessmen. Obsessives. People who feel like God put them on earth to do whatever it is that they do. Now, do we have time to build great relationships? Do we have time to build great friendships? No. Do we have time to socialize and to hangout aimlessly? No. Do we want to do that? No. *We want to work.* I enjoy working.

So is this a choice? Are you actively *choosing* not to have friends?

Well, yes and no. I have friends. But being a “great friend” is something I will never be. I can be a *good* friend. But not a *great* friend. A great friend will call you every day and remember your birthday. I’ll get so wrapped up in my shit, I’ll never remember that stuff. And the people who are my friends understand this, and they’re usually the same way. You gravitate toward people who are like you. But the kind of relationships you see in movies—that’s impossible for me. I have good relationships with players around the league. LeBron and I will text every now and then. KG and I will text every now and then. But in terms of having one of those great, bonding friendships—that’s something I will probably never have. And it’s not some smug thing. It’s a weakness. It’s a weakness.

Do you miss the idea of having a great friendship?

Of course. It’s not like I’m saying, ‘I don’t need friends because I’m so strong.’ *It’s a weakness.* When I was growing up in Italy*, I grew up in isolation. It was not an environment suited to me. I was the only black kid. I didn’t speak the language. I’d be in one city, but then we’d move to a different city and I’d have to do everything again. I’d make friends, but I’d never be part of the group, because the other kids were already growing up together. So this is how I grew up, and these are the weaknesses that I have.

**Bryant’s father, Joe “Jellybean” Bryant, played pro basketball on four different Italian teams from 1984 to 1991.*



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Part of what makes interviewing athletes difficult is the way they purposefully misunderstand questions, and the way they ignore certain questions, and the inflexibly straightforward manner in which they answer the handful of queries they perceive as

relevant. This is not the case with Kobe. “Me sitting here, doing this interview—I don’t have to do this,” he says. “Ever since Colorado, I control my shit. If I don’t want to do something, I don’t fucking do it. Nobody is going to control my career or my life.” He is wildly discursive, but never without purpose. At one point, I ask him how the aesthetics of basketball have changed due to the rise of advanced metrics, a trend that has devalued the mid-range jump shot (which, for Bryant, remains a strength). He starts his response by comparing the mid-range game to grunge fashion, arguing that all trends are cyclical and that the mid-range game will eventually return to prominence, just as grunge fashion eventually will (and “*GQ* and *Vogue* will have an absolute shit fit” when it does). This drifts into a meditation on popular metrics like “plus-minus,” which Bryant sees as a way to measure shifts in momentum without explaining why those shifts occur. He concludes by noting that “guys like Henry Abbott actually are on to something,” which is mostly interesting because Henry Abbott is (coincidentally) the same guy who wrote the aforementioned ESPN article about free agents not wanting to go to Los Angeles (the article that Bryant supposedly did not read). A few minutes earlier, I’d asked how he feels about those who think he shoots too much. He responded by comparing himself to an 18th century Austrian.

“I’ve shot too much from the time I was eight years old,” Bryant says. “But ‘too much’ is a matter of perspective. Some people thought Mozart had too many notes in his compositions. Let me put it this way: I *entertain* people who say I shoot too much. I find it very interesting. Going back to Mozart, he responded to critics by saying there were neither too many notes or too few. There were as many as necessary.”

Assuming he spends the rest of this season in rehab, Bryant will finish his nineteenth year in the league with 32,482 points, roughly 6,000 fewer than the league’s all-time leader, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. He expresses no interest whatsoever in that record. “I could play for five or six more years if I wanted to. But I don’t. This year and next year is enough. If my goal had been going after Jabbar, I would have done that. I would have gone to a different team and scored 37 points a game.* But that was never my goal. My goal is to sit at the table with Michael and Magic, having won the same number of titles.”

**I find it amusing that — earlier in the conversation — Bryant had said he could have averaged 35 points a game if he’d gone to a different team. Twenty minutes later, the number he gives is 37. Somehow, he managed to increase his hypothetical nightly average by a basket, just by giving this interview.*

That sentiment, of course, raises an inescapable conflict: If Bryant's only goal is winning championships, it makes no sense for him to continue playing in Los Angeles. The team is objectively terrible. But Bryant thinks this is a temporary condition. And while his argument seems implausible, his reasoning is as sublime as it is conspiratorial.

The Lakers are not going to make the playoffs this year, and it seems unlikely that they will challenge for a title next year. So if titles are your only goal, why even play these last two seasons?

I know what Mitch [Kupchak, the Lakers GM] tells me. I know what Jim and Jeanie [Buss, the team owners] tell me. I know that they are hell-bent about having a championship caliber team next season, as am I.

But how could that possibly be done? Doesn't the league's financial system dictate certain limitations?

Well, okay: Look at the [2011] lockout. That lockout was made to restrict the Lakers. It was. I don't care what any other owner says. It was designed to restrict the Lakers and our marketability.

The Lakers specifically, or teams like the Lakers?

There is only one team like the Lakers. Everything that was done with that lockout was to restrict the Lakers' ability to get players and to create a sense of parity, for the San Antonios of the world and the Sacramentos of the world. But a funny thing happened, coming out of that lockout: Even with those restrictions, the Lakers pulled off a trade [for Chris Paul] that immediately set us up for a championship, a run of championships later, *and* which saved money. Now, the NBA vetoed that trade.* But the Lakers pulled that shit off, and no one would have thought it was even possible. The trade got vetoed, because they'd just staged the whole lockout to restrict the Lakers. Mitch got penalized for being smart. But if we could do that...

**The official reason given as to why then-commissioner David Stern vetoed the Paul trade was "basketball reasons." Stern was acting on behalf of Paul's former team, the Hornets (then playing in New Orleans), who did not have an owner at the time of the proposed deal.*

Bryant is arguing is that the Lakers will just manufacture a competitive roster, through sheer intellectual creativity. Unrestricted free agent LaMarcus Aldridge may be in play. Rajon Rondo (with whom Bryant recently had breakfast) might be on the table. It all seems hopeless, but stranger things have happened. Now, do I totally believe Kobe on

this? I'm not sure if I totally believe Kobe. But I know that I want to, and I know that he believes himself. He believes he can do anything, simply through the power of will.

In 2011, Bryant's wife Vanessa filed for divorce, citing irreconcilable differences. Yet those differences *were* reconciled, thirteen months later. They remain a married couple. "I'm not going to say our marriage is perfect, by any stretch of the imagination," Kobe says. "We still fight, just like every married couple. But you know, my reputation as an athlete is that I'm extremely determined, and that I will work my ass off. How could I do that in my professional life if I wasn't like that in my personal life, when it affects my kids? It wouldn't make any sense." The logic is weirdly airtight: If we concede that Kobe would kill himself to beat the Celtics, we must assume he'd be equally insane about keeping his family together. And he *knows* that we know this about him, so he uses that to his advantage.

He knows who he is. He really, really does.

Chuck Klosterman (@CKlosterman) is the author of eight books, most recently ***I Wear the Black Hat: Grappling with Villains (Real and Imagined)***.

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