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Bryant Steps Up With Some Mighty Big Feats

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There has never been any footage of Wilt Chamberlain's historic night, the night 44 years ago when the National Basketball Association legend did the unthinkable and scored 100 points in a single game.

Kobe Bryant didn't suffer the same fate. Replays of Bryant's 81-point performance -- the highest total since Chamberlain's feat -- in Los Angeles on Sunday night dominated sports television and radio broadcasts yesterday, eclipsing the National Football League conference championship games that decided who will play in next month's Super Bowl.

For weeks now, Bryant had been working up to this moment with one of the greatest concentrated displays of offensive prowess the game has ever seen. In 10 games this month, he is averaging 45.5 points -- a pace not seen since Chamberlain averaged 41.6 points in November 1964.

With each driving dunk, acrobatic layup and pull-up three-pointer, Bryant, 27, also has been helping his effort to rehabilitate his image, which had suffered -- some thought irreparably -- for more than two seasons. Once acclaimed as the next Michael Jordan, Bryant's career was overshadowed by sexual assault charges filed against him in Colorado in 2003, which later were dropped when his accuser said she no longer wanted to participate in the case. A subsequent civil suit was settled for an undisclosed amount. He also had well-publicized rifts with former teammate Shaquille O'Neal and Coach Phil Jackson. On top of that, the Lakers, one of the league's marquee teams, missed the playoffs last year for the first time in 11 seasons.

Bryant, who entered the league as a 17-year-old high school prodigy, has reacted to his scoring displays with the typical nonchalance of a professional athlete. "I think it's entertaining, the fact that I've been able to score points. The important thing is that I've been able to do it and we've been able to win," Bryant said. "That's why I do it -- to help ensure victories. It's only on an as-needed basis. There have been games this year, where I've scored 11 points and we've won."

But in an interview three days before his 81-point barrage against the Toronto Raptors, Bryant also said he was tired of the expectations people have for him, particularly their desire for him to equal the achievements of Jordan, who won six NBA titles and, in doing so, transcended sports marketing with his mainstream appeal.

Bryant expressed frustration that no matter how accomplished his career has been, no matter how many championships he has won, he has never been able to escape comparisons to the former Chicago Bulls and Washington Wizards star.

"I absolutely hate it. I just hate it. I don't want to hear any comparisons between me and him," Bryant said. "Enough is enough. He had a brilliant career, obviously, one of the greatest careers ever, if not the greatest, and I'm here playing with my team and we're trying to do great things. Just let the past be the past. Just embrace what I'm doing. Stop trying to compare it to what he did. Just enjoy what's going on now."

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What's going on now has been enough to improve his marketability. Nike, which had dropped Bryant from his advertisements after the Colorado case, plans on releasing the 6-foot-6 swingman's signature shoe on Feb. 1. Bryant himself plans to unveil a clothing line during the NBA all-star break next month.

"His marketing makeover is well underway," said David Carter, principal at The Sports Business Group consulting firm in Los Angeles, who noted that Bryant was pictured holding his 3-year-old daughter and kissing his wife, Vanessa, after Sunday's game. "Clearly, what he is doing is demonstrating his superstar status on the court, and at the same time trying to position himself as a kinder, gentler guy off the court."

With Sunday night's performance, Bryant reached a pinnacle that Jordan never did and has only been topped by Chamberlain, who scored 100 points against the New York Knicks in Hershey, Pa., on March 2, 1962. Bryant also became just the fifth player to score at least 70 points in a game joining Chamberlain, Elgin Baylor, David Thompson and David Robinson. Jordan's career high was 69 points. Earlier this month, Bryant joined Chamberlain and Baylor as the only players to score at least 45 points in four consecutive games.

In his 10th season, Bryant -- the son of former NBA player Joe "Jelly Bean" Bryant -- has finally become the face of the franchise for which he grew up rooting. After years of riding shotgun and often clashing with O'Neal while winning three NBA championships, Bryant now is the undisputed leader of the Lakers. Indeed, he is not only the Lakers' best player, on many nights he has to carry the team by himself.

At times, he has vented his frustrations at the team's uninspired play -- with an intentional elbow at the chin of the Memphis Grizzlies' Mike Miller, which led to a two-game suspension earlier this month, a tussle with fellow Laker Lamar Odom after a loss in Washington or a venomous rant at teammates during games.

Bryant is averaging 27.7 shots per game -- almost 10 more than his career average -- and is often criticized by teammates and fans alike for being a ball hog -- a reputation that has stuck with him for most of his career. But now, even people who long have classified Bryant as selfish are begging him to shoot. "He's incredible. You have to watch in awe," Odom said.

Jackson, who returned to coach the Lakers this season after his contract wasn't renewed in 2004, is leading the weakest team in his career and doesn't always support Bryant's high-wire act. But he said he understands that his scoring provides the Lakers with their greatest opportunity to win, especially since the team has no reliable second option. The team's record is 22-19.

When asked if it was difficult to play with someone who dominates the ball as much as Bryant, Odom said, "He's so good, you have to ride with it or you get rolled over."

Bryant said he actually is "surprised" and "happy" that he trails only Houston's Yao Ming in All-Star Game voting, but it also speaks to his popularity among fans that his jersey has climbed back among the top 10 sellers in the league after a drop-off last season.

"I think that people are getting used to who I am," Bryant said. "When I first came into the NBA, being this aggressive, this assertive, with a chip on the shoulder when I'm out here on the floor, it may have rubbed people the wrong way because they saw me as being young and cocky. Now that my role has changed, people see that and they see it as being leadership. It's just a difference in perception."

He was serenaded with chants of "MVP! MVP" at Staples Center during the home win against Toronto.

Fans around the league, however, have been less forgiving. On the road, Bryant is still frequently cast as the league's super villain: the player fans love to hate but so good that they can't turn away from him.

He is booed at every NBA arena yet fans are often mesmerized when Bryant has the ball. "I go to visiting arenas and they chant, 'Kobe sucks!' and all this other stuff, and it's cool," Bryant said. "But when they leave the arena, they need to know or leave and say, 'That's a bad boy.' "

Cognizant of NBA history, Bryant said he is flattered to reach the rarified air of players such as Chamberlain, Baylor and Jordan.

"I looked up to them, so to be mentioned in that same category is very humbling," Bryant said. "It's an honor. Makes me feel very proud because I looked up to them. Years from now, I hope other kids will do the same for me."

Staff writer Thomas Heath contributed to this report.

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