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Lakers find way to play nice

The family unit is showing signs of healing.

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Wait a minute! Hold on. What in the name of Sigmund Freud is happening with the Lakers?

Where's the anger, whining and complaining?

Where are the sloped shoulders, the glazed eyes and the "I'd rather be any place but here" look that haunted the Lakers when they were imploding only a few months ago?

On Friday night, I watched them cold-cock the Utah Jazz, and I'm still rubbing my eyes. The final score was 123-109, but the game wasn't even that close. And it wasn't the first time lately that the boys in purple and gold have sent a team home wearing the blank look of a bully stunned by a punch to the jaw.

Once a troubled bunch, suddenly the Lakers are the Brady Bunch. They're getting along, feeling the mojo, helping each other -- and winning. So far, going into today's big game against Boston, they have 19 victories in 29 tries, a record that has them just a hair behind the Pacific Division-leading Phoenix Suns, whom they defeated on Christmas Day.

Just as important, in this city built on plastic surgery and pixie dust, the Lakers are looking good doing it. There's crispness to their play, a sense of symmetry, speed and style. The season is young, and things could change -- but right now this team is one of the most exciting to watch in the NBA.

Who could have expected this? When the season began, we heard daily about how Kobe Bryant wanted out, and how Mitch Kupchak had no clue, and how 7-foot Andrew Bynum would look splendid in another team's uniform.

So I used this platform to offer a remedy.

I suggested we consider the Lakers a family -- twisted, tortured, dysfunctional and in dire need of therapy. It was time, I figured, for a collective head check.

This being Los Angeles, with a shingle for a shrink on every other block, it was easy to find help. I phoned David Levy, a Pepperdine psychology professor who loves basketball and specializes in helping families out of mental muck.

The way he saw it at the time, the Lakers family had fallen into toxic roles. At the top was Jerry Buss, the wily grandfather and owner of the family business. Jerry West, the father and day-to-day manager, had gone missing. In his place stood Kupchak, a step-dad struggling to balance the books and get some respect.

The players were out-of-control grandkids. The most important, no surprise, was Kobe. Levy said No. 24 filled the classic role of the "golden child." That would be a supremely talented elder brother; loved but loathed, pampered but burdened by his family's overwhelming expectations.

Drop the poisonous roles, Levy suggested.

On Saturday, I called him again. He had just finished reading about Friday's blowout. He told me he wasn't sure whether the Lakers had taken his earlier advice -- but the good doctor, having paid close attention since we last spoke, said he was certain that something had changed in the team's collective psyche.

"Success breeds success," he said. "They're winning now, and there is no need to retreat to the old dysfunction, the blaming roles and finger pointing. Watching them, they seem to be an entirely different team from a psychological standpoint."

The youngest of the bunch, he said, was having the biggest effect.

"The most important thing is that the little brother is coming into his own." That would be Andrew Bynum. Last year, Bryant wanted Bynum traded for Jason Kidd. But Bynum is growing up, becoming a giant before our very eyes. He is a 20-year-old prodigy who will one day be among the most dominant handful of players in the league.

Who in his right mind would trade him for the aging Kidd?

Not me.

Not Levy. He said Bynum's tremendous improvement during the off-season, spent piling muscle on his monster frame, shows that the kid has pride.

Bynum wasn't about to come back and be a punching bag again. Beautiful.

"The great thing is that all of the older brothers seem genuinely proud of the little brother," Levy added. "It's like watching a 2-year-old begin to really start getting around. The brothers are proud, and that shows that their egos are strong. . . . They aren't threatened."

Being the youngest of four boys, I can relate.

But I also know how important big brothers are. Levy's assessment of Bryant? "He's getting it now. He's doing just a great job of being a good older brother to his teammates. . . . You don't hear him making disparaging remarks. The way he is helping Bynum and the others, he is trusting, supportive and setting the right tone."

It helps that Kobe has someone at his side this year. Imagine a respected brother who had been studying in Europe and has returned astute and enlightened. That's Derek Fisher. "He's marvelous," Levy said. "A healing presence. The wisest sibling, the one people turn to because with him there is not the sense that he is out for himself."

It's all fitting together.

Even Phil Jackson, the family consigliere. He is moving the Lakers in just the right direction. He has taken hits in the past for not developing young players. Now, with youngsters such as Sasha Vujacic, Ronny Turiaf, Jordan Farmar, Luke Walton and Bynum pushing past expectations, critics can toss their remarks in with what's left of the yule log and torch them.

While they're at it, they also can toss in the scorn they've heaped on Kupchak. The Lakers' future is suddenly looking very bright, thanks largely to his draft picks and his patience. Sometimes even stepdads know their stuff.

"Doc," I told Levy, "it looks like this team is healed. Cancel those future appointments."

Not so fast, Levy said.

He likened the Lakers to a bickering couple who see him for a few sessions and the counseling pays off. Thinking their problems are over, the couple stop coming. But unless they conduct a careful inner inventory and understand exactly what they have done to heal, their old patterns of blame, anger and pain are likely to return.

Right now, when things are going smoothly, "is actually a very important moment for the Lakers," Levy said. "They have to be careful. . . . They might think it happened almost by magic, but it doesn't work that way. . . . They need to be pragmatic and look at themselves closely and identify exactly what they have done to make things work.

"Now that they are winning, this is their challenge."

OK, I replied. "Meanwhile, what about the Clippers . . ."

But then I stopped myself.

The Clippers need a shaman, not a shrink.

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