



Alexander: Lakers have an amazing hold on SoCal sports fans



[Download story podcast](#)

12:41 AM PDT on Saturday, May 31, 2008

By **JIM ALEXANDER**
The Press-Enterprise

Whether the Lakers win or lose another NBA championship in the next couple of weeks, they've already achieved an even greater feat.

In making Southern California their own, as the dominant franchise in the five counties that encompass the Los Angeles media market, they have provided a rare unifying force in a region of disparate cities.

"There are so many things that divide us in this community because of geography," said David Simon, president of the Los Angeles Sports Council. "Even the weather is different if you drive 10 miles. We don't share a common urban experience like cities on the east coast.

"One thing that brings us together is sports, either a team that everyone can rally around or a big event that touches everybody."

In the Lakers, you have both.

And it has been that way for a long enough time that this isn't a case of merely hopping on a winner's bandwagon.

Exactly one year ago, this region was on edge over what Kobe Bryant was thinking, whether he really wanted to leave and what could be done to change his mind. The team hadn't played a game in a month, but even with the Stanley Cup Finals taking place in Anaheim, the Lakers were the biggest story in town.

Now? They're off the charts, the outgrowth of a sweep through the playoffs that nobody had dared envision before the Pau Gasol trade.

Back in January, when This Space posted its annual ranking of SoCal's sports franchises and put the Lakers No. 1 for a second straight year, I made the observation that "win or lose, the Lakers are this region's immovable object," and added, "when people obsess about your team deep in the offseason, you know you've got them where you want them."

With Kobe Bryant finally justifying all of those "M-V-P" chants from the Staples Center partisans, and the team four victories away from the franchise's 10th championship in LA, it is now a runaway. The Dodgers, USC football and UCLA basketball, all teams with histories of success and popularity, are barely in the same area code.

"When I moved here in 1989, this was still 50 percent a Dodger town, 50 percent a Laker town," said Paula Duffy, an attorney who runs the "Incidental Contact" series of sports seminars for women and is a Lakers season ticket holder.

"Today, this is a Lakers town ... I think it's (because of) the fact that it really is the only sports representative of all of the counties. Hockey's a niche sport -- I know nobody wants to hear that who's a hockey fan -- and the Dodgers lost this market after 1988. They could share in this cachet, but you don't hear anybody saying, 'I'm going to a Dodger game.' "

The Lakers truly are best suited to bring the region together. SoCal is the Noah's Ark of sports, with two of just about everything, and in most cases competing teams are relatively even in support.

The Dodgers have their clientele on the LA side of the county line, and the Angels have theirs in Orange County. Same with the Ducks and Kings. And USC and UCLA have roughly equal fan bases.

But LA's other NBA representative has, true to its historic form, receded after a brief moment in the spotlight. Clipper Nation has turned back into Clipper Precinct, while the Lakers just get bigger.

Why are they so popular?

Winning helps, a lot, but the Lakers have built enough goodwill over the years to tide them over even in down seasons.

Star quality helps more. Owner Jerry Buss has always believed in using stars to build a fan base in the entertainment capital of the world, both on the floor and in the seats.

That's why the Lakers have almost always had at least one transcendent player, sometimes more. And that's why the entertainment industry is so well represented in the crowds -- and why the parade of celebrities on the overhead video boards has become a third-quarter tradition at home games.

Oh, and did we mention that we're suckers for a great story line? The Lakers have always seemed to have one, dating all the way back to the seasons in the 1960s when Jerry West and Elgin Baylor plowed ahead doggedly, and futilely, in pursuit of an elusive championship.

The Shaquille O'Neal-Kobe Bryant soap operas of the early part of this decade didn't dampen interest in the Lakers. They heightened it. And when O'Neal left, the story line was equally compelling: Bryant's pursuit of a championship as The Man.

There is another factor. For all of the turbulence that sometimes surrounds this franchise, its ownership and management are stable. Former players remain a part of the family, from the front office to the bench to the microphone.

Put it all together -- success, glamour, loyalty, drama -- and it's easy to understand why our corner of the continent will be preoccupied over the next two weeks by the pursuit of the Larry O'Brien Trophy.

"It is a phenomenon, and it's what I base my (seminar) business on, that sports connects us," Duffy said.

"I've got the pompon on my car antenna, I'm wearing my Lakers hat, and at every light I stop at, every man says, 'Were you at the game? Go Lakers!' Women at supermarkets always talk to me because of the shirt or the hat ... It crosses all socio-economic bounds."

It's not going to ebb any time soon, either.

Reach Jim Alexander at 951-368-9543 or jalexander@PE.com