The Enigma of Kobe Bryant

All things considered, he will be remembered well.

January 28, 2020 By Kate Ferguson

When Shaquille O'Neal saw the headline announcing that Kobe Bryant had been killed in a helicopter crash, his reaction was much like mine and probably millions of other people who glimpsed the news: Is this a hoax? This can't be!

Later, O'Neal would tweet about his former Los Angeles Laker teammate and offer poignant recollections about their early relationship, rivalry on the basketball court and growing respect for each other through the years.

Online, a steady stream of news stories about Bryant's legend flowed nonstop like a kaleidoscope of reflections merging in an endless variety of patterns. In the wake of his death, a picture of Kobe emerged that showed a larger-than-life aspect to this athlete, husband and father. Bryant was a man who was both lauded and vilified at different points in his life.

Many people, from the celebrated to those everyday folks who may have chanced to meet him once in their lives, cherished remembrances of this international icon.

Years ago, when I worked for Black Men magazine we requested a photo session with Bryant. By that time, Black Men was on a new trajectory moving quickly from being a comprehensive lifestyle magazine to a racy publication that more and more focused on pictorials of beautiful, scantily-clad video vixens.

Along the way, up-and-coming sports stars living their lifestyles of the rich and famous were incorporated into the mix. When staffers planned a shoot with Bryant, they included a setup with bathing suit models.

I'll never forget the call I had with a gentleman from Bryant's camp. Absolutely no way, he said, Kobe didn't go for those sorts of optics. My publisher at the time let the matter rest there.

Bryant, who was later signed by Nike to an endorsement deal in 2003, became a super-hot commodity who was in big demand for endorsement deals. The sports company inked a deal with him just days after allegations that Bryant sexually assaulted a 19-year-old woman went public.

Chatter around the magazine's office included references to Bryant's wholesome image that had made swimsuit models posing with him taken off the table for a Black Men's magazine shoot.

After the case was settled, Bryant's star—that had dipped so precipitously for a short period of time—rebounded and burned even brighter. Although he lost some endorsement deals, other companies, such as Spalding, Lenovo and Turkish Airlines, remained steadfast.

Then, in 2011, Bryant was fined for yelling a homophobic slur at an NBA referee. Two years later, he admonished a fan on Twitter for using an anti-gay slur.

When another fan reminded him of his 2011 transgression, Bryant responded that his ignorance at that time wasn't cool. He'd learned from his experience, he said, and he expected for others to do the same.

As years passed, Bryant's personal growth and maturity restored much of the shine to his trophies. He emerged as a sort of Renaissance Man of the sports world. He was known for being multi-lingual—fluent in Italian and able to hold conversations in Chinese, Slovenian, Serbian and Spanish, among other languages. Being an accomplished linguist allowed him to hurl trash talk at competitors in their own tongue. This was a way for Bryant to mess with their heads on the court.

A self-described "alpha male," Bryant also had a mellow side. His philanthropy and support of kids through The Kobe & Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation, After-School All-Stars, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Stand Up to Cancer, as well as other charities, is also a part of his legacy.

In 2013, Bryant's penchant for business saw him launch an investment firm, Bryant Stibel, with Jeff Stibel, the founder of Web.com. One of the companies the firm invested in was Alibaba Group, which resulted in a partnership in 2015, between Bryant and Jack Ma, the executive chairman of Alibaba.

The company distributed a documentary about Kobe called Muse. Included in the deal was the production of branded products and the creation of a social media platform that would be a model for future collaborations to launch other "Star, Media, Platform" (SMEP) properties.

This collaboration model tapped into a cultural exchange that was aimed at further connecting inspirational figures, such as Kobe, with Chinese youth so their "achievements and legacies could be learned and shared among youngsters," according to a press release about the deal.

Bryant also invested in BodyArmor, a sports drink manufacturer, and founded a media company named Granity Studios that produced several films—the aforementioned Muse and Dear Basketball—projects on which Kobe lavished his time and attention.

Bryant's legacy is so rich and varied that pinning him down has always been hard to do, one of the chief attributes of an enigma.

But all of us as human beings seem to have this propensity for enigmatic behavior. No one is either all good or all bad. People have different qualities and sides to them that can veer sharply from one extreme to the other.

Most of the time, like Bryant, we rest somewhere in the middle where overlap occurs.

R.I.P. Kobe

Sunrise: August 23, 1978

Sunset: January 26, 2020

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