

Tenor of Our Times

Volume 10

Article 11

Spring 4-29-2021

Kobe and Curly

John Richard Duke

Harding University, jrduke@harding.edu

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Recommended Citation

Duke, John Richard (Spring 2021) "Kobe and Curly," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 10, Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol10/iss1/11>

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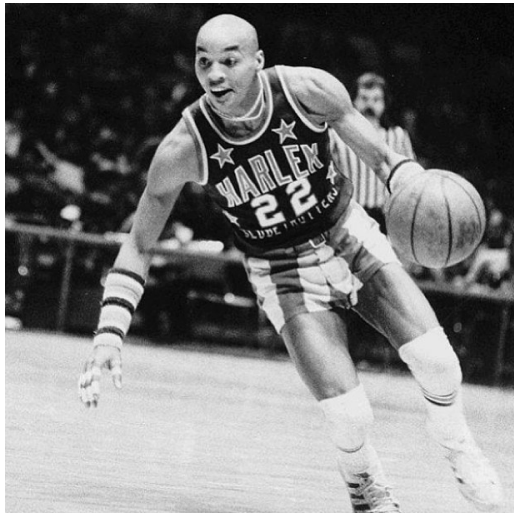
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Dr. Duke grew up in Searcy, Arkansas. He earned his Ph.D. in History in 2008 from the University of Mississippi. He played and/or coached basketball in high school, college, and in various clubs in El Salvador and Germany. Dr. Duke currently serves as an Associate Professor of History at Harding University.



Kobe Bryant, 2014



Fred "Curly" Neal, 1970

IN MEMORIAM: KOBE AND CURLY

By Dr. John Richard Duke

After a student approached me and asked if I would write an “In Memoriam” for Kobe Bryant and Curly Neal, I was torn. I had never set out to write about Kobe and Curly, but I also want to be receptive to students. I also believe that it is good to express condolences and love to those going through loss. Any type of small, kind gesture can help someone navigate the grief they are feeling. In most cases, though, we remember or express condolences to those we know personally. I never knew Kobe or Curly, but all three of us have in common a love for the game of basketball. This is not a “watch it on television” type of love, or even a “play pick-up everyday kind of love.” It’s the kind of love that causes you to thank God in a prayer as a two-year-old that your new house “has a basket.” It’s the kind of love that forces you to shoot 50 free throws every day in the summer and record the number you make, and if you had not made at least 42, you had to start over. The kind of love that causes you to seek out courts and playgrounds all over the world, just to play. Its hours and hours of practice when no one is watching, pursuing perfection, and pushing the limits of your physical abilities. It’s a little hard to describe, but Kobe had it, Curly had it, and so many others of us have it. A love for basketball. I never met Kobe or Curly. I am not aware of their personal successes and failures, but I share their love for basketball. They both helped me learn to love it more.

Basketball is an art, and in 2020 the basketball community lost two of its most intriguing artists. On January 26, 2020, Kobe Bryant, his daughter, and seven others passed away tragically in a helicopter crash near Los Angeles. A few months later, on March 26, 2020, Fred “Curly” Neal passed away while in his home near Houston. Curly lived 77 years, and Kobe lived 41. Much has been written to express the influence of Kobe and Curly on the game of basketball. Their fame, Kobe with the

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Los Angeles Lakers and Curly with the Harlem Globetrotters, helped pack arenas around the globe. Yet, their legacies are much more than basketball. Kobe and Curly influenced both sport and the broader world culture in inspiring ways.

Kobe Bryant was born on August 23, 1978, in Philadelphia to Joe and Pamela Bryant. His father was a basketball star in his own right, playing for three different teams in the National Basketball Association between 1975 and 1983. Kobe spent much of his childhood living in Italy while his father continued his basketball career in Europe. In fact, he credited his time in Italy as helping shape his game.

His fame came, though, as a member of the Los Angeles Lakers. Kobe did not turn me into a Lakers fan, but he sure made it easier to follow the team in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Lakers of the 1980s first drew my attention. Byron Scott, Kurt Rambis, James Worthy, Michael Cooper, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and so many others compelled my attention from the moment I remember watching professional basketball. The key, though, was Magic Johnson. The tall player that developed the skill set needed to play near the basket, but also to run the point guard position, provided hope for all players whose youth league basketball coaches tried to force them to “stay on the block.”

My neighbor across the street, Greg, also pushed me toward the Lakers. Several years older than me, he and I would spend hours in our driveways always debating whose driveway got to be the Los Angeles Forum. He was older, so he usually won that debate.

Though Kobe Bryant quickly rose to national recognition, I did not pay close attention to him. He first became nationally known while playing at Lower Marion High School in Philadelphia. Then in the 1996 NBA Draft, the Charlotte Hornets drafted Kobe with the 13th pick and quickly traded him to Los Angeles. The Lakers also added Shaquille O’Neal and a few others, and by 2000 had won the first of three straight NBA titles. Happy that the Lakers were winning NBA titles, I still did not follow Kobe too closely during his rise to NBA success. The fact that my fellow Arkansan, Derek Fisher, helped the Lakers win three in a row

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was much more important to me. Kobe just never drew my attention the way that Magic or Michael did.

Then, in 2007, Kobe began playing for the United States Men's basketball team. Kobe mesmerized fans in international competition as he and his teammates attempted to redeem some of the losses USA basketball had experienced in the early 2000s. His best moment came against Spain in the 2008 Olympic Gold Medal Game in Beijing. The United States held a double-digit lead going into the last quarter only to find Spain cut the lead to nearly nothing. Taking the burden on his back, Bryant scored 13 points in the final minutes of the game to ensure a United States victory and a Gold Medal.

After his gold medal performance, I started to pay attention to Kobe Bryant. It seemed like he had done it all. He had grown into an elder statesman in the NBA. He had scored eighty-one in a game. He had won a dunk contest. He had won multiple championships. He had apologized. He was a multi-year all-star. He had stayed with the same team since his rookie year. He had done many things prior to 2008, but it was 2008 that made me start paying attention to Kobe in a different way.

The Lakers won two more championships in 2009 and 2010, but injuries and poor teams plagued the later stages of Kobe's career. Following the championship season of 2010, Kobe's Lakers would never play in another NBA Conference Final. In fact, in Kobe's final three seasons, the Lakers would not even make the playoffs. Bryant only played a few games in some of those years, 6 in 2014 and 35 in 2015. Despite poor teams and limited play, I became more interested in Kobe. In many ways, Kobe was more intriguing in the later stages of his career than he had been during the first few years.

Others were interested in Kobe too. Between 2006 and 2014, I spent most of my time in Germany teaching at a University. In local sports clubs Kobe became a unifying point that helped bring people together across cultures. Kobe and the Lakers became a topic of conversation among my basketball friends in ways that other NBA players and teams were not. Kobe played a role in bringing us together.

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One of Kobe's most magical games, his final game, brought us together. He had announced that 2016 would be his final season, and since the Lakers were not even close to making the playoffs, it became apparent that Kobe's final game would be April 13th in Los Angeles against Utah. It had been a terrible season. The team had only won 16 games. Kobe had played in 65 games averaging around 16 points per game. Yet the stage had been set for that final game, and Kobe would produce the way we all expected Kobe to produce. He astounded his fans, teammates, and everyone watching by scoring 60 points, including several clutch baskets in the closing minutes. It was art at its finest.

I watched Kobe's final game sitting in a conference room in small-town Arkansas with a couple of friends from Germany. Ironically, my friends and I did not really come to the conference room to watch Kobe. We were more interested in watching Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson, and the rest of the Golden State Warriors attempt to win an NBA record 73rd game of the season. This should have been the biggest story of the evening. After all, with the victory the Warriors would take the record away from the great Jordan-led Chicago Bulls. As we flipped back and forth between games, it became clear that we had better watch Kobe.

Kobe played 42 minutes, scored 60 points, and won the game. He scored from all levels hitting jumpers, threes, and free throws. It was vintage Kobe, and in small-town Arkansas, friends from the United States and Germany loved every minute of it.

On Sunday morning, January 26, 2020, the news that Kobe Bryant had died scrolled across my television screen. I first thought that this had to be some reaction to a comedy skit from Saturday Night Live or one of the late night talk shows the night before. However, it was not. I texted someone writing "Kobe." They texted back "sad."

Later that day, I saw several other members of the basketball community. When I arrived at the gym, it became clear that I was not the only one who was sad. The basketball community had lost one of its own. For many college-age players, Kobe had been their Magic Johnson

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or Michael Jordan. He had been the one they had cheered for as elementary and junior high students. As expressions of support poured out across the country, basketball players turned to their shoes. Player after player wrote messages on their shoes to honor their fallen basketball hero. Major sports news programs showed some of these shoe tributes. Shoe tributes to Kobe also existed in small gyms in small-town Arkansas.

Kobe's legacy is deep, and it goes far beyond basketball. He championed the difficult task of pursuing your passion with a fierce competitiveness and demanding excellence from yourself and those around you. He made it clear that greatness comes from hard work and nothing less. He proclaimed the Mamba Mentality.

Kobe left the culture many things. He embraced his creative and artistic side. His short film, *Dear Basketball*, for which he won an Academy Award, brilliantly conveys the hopes and dreams of so many kids who grew up in the basketball community. His commitment to coaching his daughter and helping organize leagues for young men and women helped encourage fathers to do their best to be "girdads." His passion for his Italian hometown, his willingness to keep his Italian and Spanish language skills alive, and his support for soccer players, reminded everyone that the people of the world are tightly connected even though that seems sometimes easily forgotten. Kobe left a certain impact on basketball, but he also left an impact on the broader culture. Just a few months after the passing of Kobe, Fred "Curly" Neal passed away in his home on March 26. Curly's career came much before Kobe. In fact, it is not too difficult to argue that much of what Curly did paved the way for Kobe.

Born in Greensboro, NC in 1942, Curly Neal played college basketball at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, NC. He averaged 23.1 points per game and was named All-Conference during his senior year at Smith.

However, Curly's basketball fame would come as a member of the Harlem Globetrotters. Curly played for the Globetrotters from 1963

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to 1985. He played more than 6,000 games in 97 countries. Known for his long distant shooting and for being a masterful entertainer, Curly was best known for his dribbling skills.

The Globetrotters are central to the spread of basketball in the United States and internationally. Curly and his teammates traveled around the world multiple times bringing people of various backgrounds together to watch basketball entertainment at the highest level. As Global Ambassadors for the United States, the Globetrotters represented, and helped shape, perspectives on American Culture to international audiences.

With his baldhead and dribbling sequences, Curly easily became one of the most recognizable Globetrotters. His fame only grew with appearances in the cartoon *Scooby Doo* and in several Globetrotter specific cartoons. The cartoon experiences expanded to both animated and in-person movie and television roles. Basketball fans were inspired by the long distant shots and dribbling exhibitions. However, on the court and in popular culture, Curly brought a culture of joy to those who never played or really even watched basketball.

Curly and the Globetrotters received several awards for their efforts. The Globetrotters were inducted into the National Basketball Hall of Fame. Curly was inducted into the North Carolina sports Hall of Fame in 2008 and had his Globetrotters #22 Jersey retired in Madison Square Garden the same year.

In small-town Arkansas, I remember being excited when the Globetrotters appeared on *Scooby Doo*. I would go out into the driveway, grab a basketball, and try to copy the tricks I saw Curly do with the ball. Could I lay down on the ground and dribble? Could I spin the ball on my finger? Could I roll the ball from one end of my arm, across the back of my neck, to the end of my other arm. Curly's inspiration led to hours of practice and fun on a cracked driveway in small-town Arkansas. We spent hours practicing what Curly taught us. I would play on my own, or if I was lucky, be joined by siblings or kids from the neighborhood.

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At school, we turned the skills Curly taught us into a performance. In a program called *Little Dribblers*, we elementary basketball players performed at halftime of local high school games. We performed different ball handling skills, wrapping the ball around our legs, back, and head. We dribbled around our backs and through our legs. The final act to our *Little Dribblers* show was to lay down on our side and dribble the basketball, then stand up and spin the ball on our finger. We did all of this while *Sweet Georgia Brown*, the Globetrotter's theme music, was blaring over the loud speakers.

Curly Neal, and his globetrotter teammates, helped us love basketball. Curly brought joy to small-town Arkansas and helped young men and women fall in love with the magic of basketball. He paved the way for many. He might have even helped pave the way for Kobe. The loss of Kobe and Curly in early 2020 represented the loss of two geniuses. They both affected the basketball world in big cities and in small-town Arkansas. They brought people together. However, it was not just basketball. Kobe and Curly both contributed mightily to the sport of basketball, but also to the culture of the world. They were artists who painted with long distant shots, powerful dunks, last second buzzer beaters, and inspiring dribbling exhibitions. To the families of Kobe and Curly, thank you for sharing them with the world. To Kobe and Curly, thank you for sharing your art.