

GUEST COLUMN

Missing Kobe Bryant, proud icon of Philly hoops

By **Rich Westcott**
Times Guest Columnist

The unfathomable helicopter crash that took the life of basketball legend Kobe Bryant was not only a massive tragedy, but one that left the world of sports and those well beyond it in a state of shock and utter sadness. To use a familiar synonym, there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Few athletes have ever been as popular as Bryant. Even fewer have ever been as successful.

As the mounds of statistics and accomplishments published the day after the accident ably demonstrated, Bryant's name has been etched in the annals of basketball's all-time greats. Not only that, but his highly likeable personality added another huge reason to be such a successful person.

From Lower Merion High School to the Los Angeles Lakers as an 18-year-old, Bryant had a career that few could duplicate. And how ironic was it that his place on the NBA's all-time scoring list would not only be passed by a fellow Laker, LeBron James, but in the area where Bryant

grew up and against his favorite boyhood team.

And speaking of Lower Merion, Bryant never forgot his roots. Along with returning home on numerous occasions, he made a large contribution to his high school that went toward refurbishing the gym where he played. Appropriately, the gym was then named after him.

Bryant's popularity was evident even when he was in high school, where he played after living for seven years in Italy while his father, Joe "Jelly Bean" Bryant played after a nine-year NBA career, including two years with the 76ers. The attendance was always larger than normal when Kobe played, both at home and at away games.

That was confirmed this week by a friend who taught at Haverford High School and handled ticket sales at basketball games. Whenever Bryant and his Lower Merion team would visit the Fords, she said, ticket sales for games doubled. And there was not an empty seat in the house.

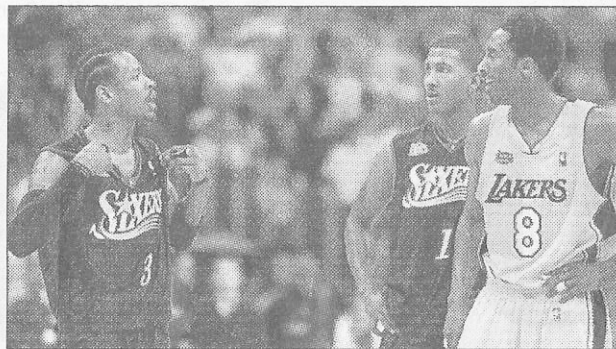
Of course, one of the unforgettable aspects of Bryant's career was the group of

area players to which he was a major part.

The Philadelphia area has produced more professional basketball players than any area in the country with the possible exception of New York. When you consider our college and pro basketball history and all the great players who were born in this region, it is no exaggeration to say that we live in the basketball capital of the country.

Start with Wilt Chamberlain. Then there were Hall of Famers Paul Arizin, Tom Gola, Earl Monroe, and Guy Rogers, and today's biggest star from the area, Kyle Lowry. Add to these, local greats such as Ernie Beck, Geoff Petrie, Wali Jones, Lionel Simmons, Rasheed Wallace, Ray Scott, Hal Lear, Wayne Hightower, Larry Cannon, Matt Guokas Jr. and Sr., Fred Carter, Aaron McKie, and Bill Melchionni, and you have an outstanding list of basketball stars who were born in the Philadelphia area.

This is by no means a complete list. Many more names could be added, making it an amazing collection of standout male players.



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Philadelphia 76ers' Allen Iverson, left, argues with the Los Angeles Lakers' Kobe Bryant at the end of Game 2 of the NBA Finals on June 8, 2001, in Los Angeles, as 76ers' Raja Bell looks on at rear. Iverson complained that the Lakers were holding him during the game. After losing Game 1, Bryant and the Lakers won four straight to take the NBA crown. Bryant was killed in a helicopter crash on Sunday.

Did you know that during one season just a few years ago, there were 10 players in the NBA who were born in the Philadelphia area? That group included Tyreke Evans, Rondae Hollis-Jefferson, and Jameer Nelson - all from Chester, twin brothers Marcus and Markieff Morris, Michael Kidd-Gilchrist, Wayne Ellington, Dion Waiters, Rasual Butler, and Lowry.

Naturally, the Philadelphia area has had its share of great

coaches who are native sons, too. Jay Wright, Fran Dunphy, Herb Magee, Phil Martelli, Jack Ramsay, Bo Ryan, Dan Dougherty, Bill Foster, and Ernie Prudente are among the outstanding mentors who piloted college basketball teams here and elsewhere.

Another interesting point about local boys who made good was fashioned by the Philadelphia Warriors when they won the 1955-56 NBA

championship. No less than five of the 10 players on that team came into this Earth here. They were Arizin, Gola, Beck, Jackie Moore and George Dempsey. Two others - Jack George and Larry Hennessy - went to local colleges, as did the coach, George Senesky. Let's see a modern team match that as a home-made club.

It all goes to show that Kobe Bryant was part of a very special piece of this area's basketball history. Indeed, he was undeniably one of the largest parts of that piece.

His career puts him among the all-time greats of the game, both locally and as a professional player.

Now, with a broken heart, we are forced to realize his loss. Both as a player and as a person, it is a loss that has produced insurmountable grief.

Rich Westcott is a sports writer and historian, and the author of 26 books. He once covered Philadelphia area basketball and before that was a sports writer for the Daily Times.