

Friday, February 23, 2007

The thrill is gone

The once-proud Celtics franchise is coming to town, but it is now known more for its losing than its storied rivalry with the Lakers.



It's Showtime: The Lakers' Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, right, blocks the shot of the Celtics' Robert Parish during the 1987 NBA Championship won by the Lakers, four games to two.

FILE PHOTO, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



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The personal highlight of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's NBA career is 22 seasons old and padlocked in the basketball past of short shorts, knee-high tube socks, his goggled eyes and one parquet floor.

"June 1985," the Hall of Famer said, pointing to the Staples Center photograph taken the day his Lakers finally, in the club's ninth try, wrestled an NBA championship from the Boston Celtics.

The victory came on a Sunday in the silent, steamy church of Boston Garden and beneath the rafters hung with 16 green and white world-championship banners and the sheafs honoring Bill Russell's retired No. 6, Bob Cousy's 14, John Havlicek's 17 and Bill Sharman's 21.

That was day the Celtics' Larry Bird, the self-proclaimed "Hick from French Lick (Ind.)," cried leaving the floor, and Kevin McHale dropped to his knees, praying too late. Laker Magic Johnson smiled in the lights and Abdul-Jabbar was named playoff MVP.

"We were the only team to win a championship on their floor," Abdul-Jabbar recalled sweetly about the Celtics-Lakers series that settled what he would later describe the "blood feud."

Two decades ago the Celtics-Lakers rivalry was the centerpiece of the NBA. All the meetings, even the two regular-season games, were enormous events pitting the Best of the East vs. Best of the West, Grit vs. Glitz, Ground vs. Air, Legend vs. Legend.

Tonight, the history is all that's glorious about the Staples Center meeting between the Celtics, who stumble in with a league-worst 13-40 record and three games beyond a franchise-record 18-game losing streak, and the Lakers (30-25), who have lost their past six games.

The Celtics-Lakers rivalry is over, its mystique gone, as past-tense as The Forum and Boston Garden.

The clash has lost its titans to retirement, leaving Lakers All-Star Kobe Bryant without a primary foe in a series famed for the legendary matchups of Lakers Johnson and Abdul-Jabbar against Bird and, before them, Lakers Elgin Baylor, Jerry West and Wilt Chamberlain against Russell and Cousy.

Bird, in his 1989 autobiography "Drive," wrote that "there was nothing I relished more than having a chance to go head-to-head with him (Johnson) for the big prize."

In the 58 seasons since the NBA began crowning champions, the Celtics and the Lakers have made The Finals 37 times, including 10 going head-to-head, and won 30 titles (Celtics 16, Lakers 14).

The 1962 series was the setting for West's steal-and-score in Game 3 and Russell's 30-point, 40-rebound night and Cousy's clock-draining dribbling, both in Game 7.

The Lakers' first seven championship series defeats stretched from Baylor's rookie Minneapolis season in 1958-1959 to Don Nelson's wild bucket that decided 1969's Game 7 in a Forum ceiling stuffed with balloons.

West, the man behind the NBA logo, had been denied an NBA title all that time by Red Auerbach's Celtics. After Auerbach's death last year, West admitted, "I had the misfortune of having to play against Red and his Celtics."

Even in 1984, Bird, McHale, Robert Parish and famed Game 2 ball thief Gerald Henderson won the Celtics' 15th title by beating the "Showtime" Lakers, 4-3, with two overtime games.

Each Lakers championship defeat to the Celtics, Abdul-Jabbar wrote, "sank like a sword into the body of the team."

Only in 1985, after eight Finals losses to Celtics, did Showtime finally find salvation in the series Abdul-Jabbar described "as haunted by 25 years of epic rivalry."

The Lakers recovered after Game 1's "Memorial Day Massacre" defeat, 148-114, to take the title in six games. Abdul-Jabbar, the NBA's oldest Finals MVP at 38, had 29 points as the Lakers locked up the championship, 111-100.

In the 1987 series highlighted by Johnson's running skyhook later in Game 4, the Lakers won again, defeating the Celtics, 4-2, for their 10th title. But it was the 1985 championship - the only Celtics elimination at the Garden - that Abdul-Jabbar will always remember as the rivalry's grandest moment.

That was the victory that was worth the feud, the lusty booing and pelting from Garden fans and the siege of Celtic pride that once overtook and rocked the Lakers team bus.

Even in defeat, Bird knew that Celtics-Lakers was "the series the press wanted, the fans wanted and we players wanted," he wrote.

Now, 20 seasons later, the Celtics have yet to return to that height while the Lakers rebounded alone seven more times to win four more titles.

The closest the NBA has come to a Celtics-Lakers title battle was in 2000, when Lakers Bryant, Shaquille O'Neal and Coach Phil Jackson defeated the Indiana Pacers coached by the "Hick from French Lick."

"The rivalry is certainly not what it used to be," said Matt Zaysing, a historian at the Naismith

Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass. "But the NBA wouldn't have had that golden era or be where it is today without Celtics-Lakers."

The original fight has long since lost its fire. The rivalry has been snuffed cold like the leftover stub of Auerbach's last victory cigar.

Auerbach, who guided the Celtics to nine titles, died in October, sparing him the sight of this season's team that has lost 20 of its past 21 games.

He doesn't have to hear the boos from the faithful or see the paper bags over their heads. He doesn't have to suspect a tank job at hand, given that all the losing only increases the chances of winning the lottery and first dibs on Ohio State's Greg Oden or Texas' Kevin Durant.

The legend didn't have to sit through the last Celtics games against the Lakers on Jan. 31 at the Garden when fans committed sacrilege, chanting "M-V-P" for Bryant, who scored 43 points in the Lakers' 111-98 victory.

But Lakers assistant Abdul-Jabbar will be there tonight, perhaps reminiscing about the Celtics-Lakers rivalry that once meant everything.