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Lakers become a family, in a good way

Kobe Bryant and others have helped the team find its equilibrium, and Pau Gasol has shown an outsider can be embraced. But sometimes these things don't follow a smooth, untroubled path.

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Dr. David Levy, you've done a fine job giving the Lakers a mental lube job, but we need you again. The end of the regular season draws near, expectations are on the rise, there's talk of a title -- and we're worried.

We don't want the Lakers getting ahead of themselves, we want them basking in the now. We want to keep hearing that calming chant emanate from the locker room on game nights: ohhhmmm! It's time for Kobe Bryant and his brothers to get back on the couch, just to make sure the good vibes keep flowing.

Who would have thought we'd be here? Back when the season started, the Lakers were mental mushrooms. Bryant wanted out. Andrew Bynum was a nobody. When Mitch Kupchak spoke, everyone smirked.

Then I found Levy, a Pepperdine psychology professor who happens to have a basketball jones and a Westside practice treating celebrities lost in dysfunction.

The Lakers and Levy, this was a match made in heaven.

In this space in October, Levy explained that if they came to him he would treat the Lakers like a dysfunctional family. Everyone would be assigned a familial role: from Old Man Jerry Buss, the wise and sometimes crotchety grandfather, to consigliere Phil Jackson, the trusted family counselor. Nobody would be more important than the Golden Child: Kobe Bryant, the big brother whose good looks and genius had so overshadowed his kid brothers that they'd come to love and loath him, all at once.

The Lakers would be fine, Levy assured, as long as Bryant became a good big brother, taking Baby Brother Bynum and the others under his wing. If this were to occur the Lakers would be able find their balance point -- or, as Levy put it, their "homeostasis."

Levy's advice must have sunk in because when Bynum hurt his knee, step-dad Kupchak stepped up. He'd found his voice. He shook the family and surprised us all by aggressively trading for Pau Gasol, the crafty Spaniard whom Levy likens to a foreign exchange student.

We all know the Lakers have just kept on winning. The bum knee has hardly derailed them. But when I drove to the Westside to pay him a visit the other day, Levy told me not to take that seamless transition for granted. It was, as he put it, "diagnostic."

Diagnostic? Please explain.

"If a family does not have its footing, its equilibrium, an outsider can be perceived as a threat," Levy said. Sometimes, an exchange student walks in and suddenly the house is splintered by jealousy, backstabbing and hurt feelings. But cool, lanky Gasol walked in and everyone wrapped their arms around his pale shoulders.

Doc, how'd they pull it off?

"The months before, that winning, the way Kobe was being a good big brother, they had found that homeostasis we talked about."

Levy rubbed his chin, contemplative. I figured he was wondering why Britney Spears couldn't be this easy to treat.

What the boys in purple and gold seem to have now is synergy, he said, before continuing. They've also got good gestalt. Wholeness. Superb social chemistry. They now can tell a coherent narrative about themselves. Having taken a stranger in, they've become a near-perfect "blended family."

It won't be long before we see these guys on Oprah.

"Look at the foreign exchange student," the doctor said. "The family sees him as an opportunity for them to grow and learn." Gasol has unique talent: the passing and cutting style he learned in Spain. He also has unselfish ways: no attention-grabbing tattoos and no agenda. The Lakers have picked up on much of this.

"What's really cool," Levy said, "is that he's also learned from his new brothers."

Gasol has always looked as if he should be hanging in a Barcelona cafe, mellowing out with a beret on his head and a book of poetry in his hands. But with the Lakers, he's starting to get a little Hollywood in his veins. He dunks and thumps his chest and struts around with Lakers swagger. Yep, Doc, that's cool, in an L.A. sort of way.

And the Spaniard has freed the others to take ownership of their true selves. Levy ran down the list. Buss and Kupchak. Wise Jackson and the kid brothers: Sasha Vujacic, Jordan Farmar, Ronny Turiaf -- all of them have looked remarkably comfortable these last few weeks.

"Wow, look at [Lamar] Odom," he said, grinning broadly. "He's never looked happier or more confident." All the pressure of being Kobe's sidekick had stunted his growth. "His new role has freed him to either be the brother he always wanted to be, or the brother he is simply best suited to be. Whatever it is, it's working . . . and amazing to watch."

I told Levy that if Bynum returns and Gasol moves to power forward, I see a championship run. Many of us do.

"Ah, watch it," the good doctor warned, leaning forward. "Sometimes this kind of thing doesn't just keep going on a smooth and steady path."

This family can't consider itself completely healed: They still might come off the mental rails. Maybe they relax and lose focus. Maybe the Golden Child comes home cranky one day, there's an argument and the younger brothers end up hanging their heads in shame.

Maybe they think they've happened upon enlightenment. Facing off against San Antonio in the playoffs and Bruce Bowen's razor elbows will surely be a reality check.

"They need to watch out for one thing right now," Levy said. "Hubris."

No worries. Hubris is fixable -- on the couch.

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