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Lakers need to play the better mind game

Malibu professor says they need to gain the psychological advantage early over the Celtics by beating them in Boston, their safe place from which the Celtics gain their strength.

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When it's all over, when the confetti begins falling and the champagne corks pop, this Lakers-Celtics championship series will have been decided not by sharp elbows and rim-rattling dunks, but by the inner game.

Yes, the new champ will be the one with the right stuff in the good old noggin. At least that's my take. More important, since he played a big role in rescuing the Lakers from the mental swamplands, that's the considered opinion of our favorite Malibu shrink, Dr. David Levy.

"These teams are incredibly evenly matched . . . that's where the mental advantage comes in," Levy told me this week, *The Times'* sports section, as usual, in his hand. "The difference is going to be decided by who can get that little edge. We're talking hedging bets from 50-50 to 51-49 . . . but that little bit is very important."

Levy, you may recall, is the hoops-crazed Pepperdine psychology professor who, all season in this column, has provided sharp diagnosis and regular checkups for L.A.'s only true NBA team.

Before the season began, Levy told us that if the Lakers were to sit on his couch, he'd treat them like a dysfunctional family, focusing on petulant Kobe Bryant, the golden child who needed to learn how to be a wise and patient older sibling. Sure enough, as the season successfully unfolded, Kobe began raving about his Lakers "family" and how everyone on the team, the guys he once treated like gum-stuffed piñatas, suddenly felt like a brother he'd give his life for.

Levy noted this week that he's quite pleased with the progress, but before ending therapy an NBA title must be won. Getting there will be the stiffest of mental journeys. To help out, the doctor has spent weeks keenly watching the boys in green and white, studying their habits, looking for tendencies. The Lakers, he believes, must quickly introduce "noise in Boston's individual and collective psyches."

And how, it was asked, to do that?

"Attack not just their weaknesses. Attack their strengths."

In short, at the opening bell, hit the first Celtic you see with a stiff jab, right in the chops.

The doctor believes winning this series' first game, played back East, is crucial for the Lakers. That's because in the playoffs, the Celtics have been victors in all but a single game in Boston. In their collective identity, home is their strength, their safe place. Attack that safe place effectively and suddenly doubt and vulnerability will take hold.

"It's like the guy who thinks the greatest, most solid thing in his life is his relationship, and then he finds out his wife is cheating on him," said Levy, who has counseled his share of husbands and wives. "This happens, it's incredibly rattling. Certainty is shaken. You lose your bearings and just don't know where to turn."

Winning early, I reminded him, winning away from home, that ain't easy. Not against these guys. They're so tough that Boston could sweep.

Not so fast, he advised.

Levy noted the Celtics seem rigid and inflexible. They struggled to adapt to the speed of Atlanta and got all gummed up by the slowness of Cleveland. Against Detroit, there were times the Celtics looked like the Sonics.

"Trust me," he said, "they are suffering from a diffusion of responsibility, and that leads to the bystander effect," he said.

Bystander effect?

It goes something like this: the troika of Celtics stars -- Kevin Garnett, Ray Allen and Paul Pierce -- are so equal in skill, so individually accomplished, so used to being top dog, that there are times when they seem not to know whom to turn to when the tension builds. This is a classic case, he said, of social loafing. (He'd begun speaking in terms I could comprehend.) In other words, too often they stand around, waiting for the other guy to take charge.

Not that the Celtics lack ego. They're a team of preeners. They shout and posture and do the chest thump thing, but Levy says they are psychologically vulnerable. First, the team is run by an inexperienced point guard whose jumper becomes a knuckleball in the clutch. And the Big Three, for all of their greatness, are saddled by aging legs, a sense that there's not much time left to win big, and a lack of championship experience.

"Crunch time is going to be interesting," Levy said, running his fingers through his beard. "They might believe they are good enough to win it all, but all the belief in the world won't really help in crunch time. . . . The Celtics have never been there before."

It's true the same can be said for a lot of the Lakers. Just last season, remember, Sasha

Vujacic looked like a member of the Manhattan Beach High JV. This season, Sasha and his band mates have been great, but they've never felt anything like they'll feel come tonight.

The young ones have big mental roles to play, much of it by helping provide distraction. Levy said he could see someone like Vujacic -- that bundle of greasy-haired hyperactivity -- sending someone like the dignified Allen to the basketball psych ward.

In the end, of course, this series will probably end up turning on Mr. Bryant. Before the season began, when he was prone to going off half-cocked, we thought Bryant might soon be in need of a Courtney Love-style intervention.

What a difference a season makes.

"Kobe, from a mental standpoint, has become like Tiger Woods," the doctor said with his customary chuckle. "In the end, that'll probably be the difference. Think about it, on the last hole, in the crunch, are you going to bet against Tiger?"

Not a chance.

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