

Defending NBA champions Lakers awash in losses

BY BETH HARRIS
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LOS ANGELES — Brian Shaw knows things have soured with the Los Angeles Lakers. It's not the many losses or lingering at the bottom of the Pacific Division or the inability to win three games in a row.

He can tell by looking at Shaquille O'Neal.

"When Shaq is quiet and reserved, then something is wrong," Shaw said.

And O'Neal has been mostly silent in the locker room, going public to blame his teammates for what he perceives is their lack of effort.

It's another sign the three-time champions remain in a funk, unable to put together a winning streak, play reliable defense or stop criticizing each other.

"We've been through everything but losing, and we're not handling it well," Shaw said.

Bright spots, such as a 27-point, fourth-quarter rally to beat Dallas, followed by a solid win over Utah, have been overshadowed by losses and laments.

"Maybe some of our role players' confidence was waning a little bit, but that's what Shaq and I have to do as captains," Kobe Bryant said. "Our confidence doesn't waver. We believe that we can win and keep the team competitive."

Starting with Friday's loss to the New Orleans Hornets, the Lakers have a string of seven games against opponents who made the playoffs last season. It culminates Christmas Day, when they play Sacramento for the first time since nearly losing the Western Conference finals to the Kings.

O'Neal has criticized his teammates twice in 11 games since his return from toe surgery.

"Talk to the (guys) that ain't doing nothing," he said after Tuesday's loss at Golden State. "Don't talk to me."

A week ago, O'Neal said he wanted "eight guys out there with me who want to play."

Both times, O'Neal communicated his gripes to reporters rather than confronting his teammates. Bryant tossed similar barbs a month ago and briefly imposed the silent treatment on the supporting cast.



Laker standouts Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant embrace after winning the championship in June.

"That was pretty drastic," Shaw said.

During practice, O'Neal and Bryant talk basketball with their teammates. Behind closed doors, their silence has been deafening.

"They've kind of been going off and doing their own thing, which is their prerogative," Shaw said.

"Maybe they feel like that's a way to get the rest of the guys motivated, but the role-playing guys are doing exactly what we've done over the past three years, and it's the same guys that won three championships with them. That's why we're not going to get caught up in it," he said.

While the finger-pointing may affect younger players such as Kareem Rush, Jannero Pargo and Devean George, it's merely annoying to Shaw and other veterans such as Derek Fisher, Rick Fox and Robert Horry.

"You want people to come to you and talk to you face-to-face if they have a problem with you," Fisher said. "Everybody has dif-

ferent ways of motivation. You have to be able to take those things if you aren't in that type of power position."

Coach Phil Jackson said he hasn't observed the off-court interactions by O'Neal and Bryant with their teammates, although he noticed the two superstars playing together against Golden State "at the exclusion of some of the other guys."

But he's too busy trying to integrate the younger players and get more scoring punch from the bench to worry about the sniping.

"We have to win 50 games. We have to work harder now than we ever have in regular season games," Jackson said. "When we get over .500, we'll feel a lot better."

Losing has provoked talk of roster changes, but Jackson insists he's sticking with what he has. The Lakers are over both the salary cap and the luxury tax, which make trades unlikely.

So far, Jackson has made little use of veteran shooter Tracy Mur-

ray and Rush, who were both acquired in the summer. Murray didn't see action in nine games, and Rush has played more than 20 minutes only once.

"We're still in the process of blending people," Jackson said. "Defensively, we're just not there. We've got to get our screen-roll defense together, we've got to get our rebounding together, and we

have to make our stops count."

Jackson noted that since O'Neal returned Nov. 22, the Lakers' opponents have averaged 10 points more than they did when he was out.

"If he's the reason for it, then he's got to anchor our defense," Jackson said. "Last year, we were first in field-goal defense and 3-point defense. This year we're not

there. That tells you something."

The Lakers are getting their usual production from O'Neal and Bryant, both averaging 26.8 points heading into Sunday's game against the Orlando Magic.

"Between the other 11 guys on the team, we're getting our 30 points a game," Shaw said. "Tell them to get their 70 and the ship will get rolling."

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15 11am-7pm	16 9am-10pm	17 9am-10pm	18 9am-10pm	19 9am-10pm	20 9am-10pm	21 7am-11pm
22 10am-8pm	23 8am-10pm	24 Christmas Eve 8am-6pm	25 Christmas Day MALL CLOSED	26 9am-9pm	27 10am-9pm	28 10am-9pm
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