

# What Makes A Great Player

 February 27, 2013 **Mike Procopio**

Back in 1997 a close friend and mentor Frank Catapano once told me something that stuck with me for the rest of my life. He told me that people today overuse the word great. I asked him what he meant by that and he told me people that people don't know the difference between the word good and great. That is a statement that I use religiously when working out as well as evaluating players.

The question is always asked what defines greatness in basketball. Is it scoring, championships, filling up a stat sheet, or money made?? I think that being great is a combination of a lot of things. The bigger issue here is how the word great is thrown around the sport of basketball too much on players that aren't even close. You often hear on ESPN watching a college basketball game where the commentator mentions that a player is elite class when most are clearly not.

As a player, coach, scout, or fan it is easy to get caught up with a player that can score. But just because someone can fill up a stat sheet does not mean that they are great. The Hall Of Fame is a sacred place for great players in basketball. A player can score 20+ points a game throughout their career and never become a Hall Of Fame Player. Why you ask? **Because just because a player can score doesn't mean they impact the game enough to be put in a certain class of player.**

In today's article I am going to share with you my opinion of what makes a great player. I had the honor and privilege in working for Kobe Bryant for four years as his personal basketball consultant. In that time I worked as his personal scout for every upcoming opponent throughout the regular season as well as post season. In that time I had a chance to not only provide a service to him, but also learn about the game at a very high level from one of the game's greatest players.

Before I get into the eleven traits of a great player, I want to touch upon some of Kobe's accolades that put him in a different class than 99.9% of any player that ever stepped on a basketball court. Without question his ability to score is his calling card being the youngest player ever to score 30,000 points in an NBA career. That's one aspect of Kobe that makes him great but here are some other things that people should look at first.

**5 NBA Championships**

**2 Olympic Gold Medals**

**12 Times All NBA Defensive Team (9 Times First Team)**

**2 Time NBA Finals MVP**

**1 Time NBA MVP**

**10 Times All NBA 1st Team**

I could have gone into his scoring titles and other attributes but some of the other things that he does need to be paid attention to. The first thing that comes to mind are the five championships. That puts him in an elite class right off the top. The other two are the 12 times that he was selected to the NBA All – Defensive team which proves to me that he does it at both ends and makes sacrifices. Being selected to All NBA first team ten times speaks for itself as far as what his peers think of him as a basketball player.

Mostly the first thing that someone mentions about players especially those who play in the NBA is how many points he scores, or how many all-star games did he make. When you are looking at the complete body of work of a player so many other more important factors need to be discussed. Most of the factors that go into becoming a great player doesn't show up in a stat sheet. Most players can't or won't take the responsibility of what goes into becoming great. It isn't about just dominating the ball and scoring points. There is so much that is put into greatness besides just talent and accolades. Today we will discuss the 11 traits that make up a great player using Kobe's traits and career as the example.

### **1.) Work Ethic and desire to be great**

In basketball putting the work in before and after practice as well as the off-season is a prerequisite of being great. Talent is a precious thing that only few have, but putting in the work to refine and channel your talent is what will make you a great player. Kobe's track record of being one the hardest working player in NBA history is something that he's earned since he was a child. The



5AM on the court workouts, the rigorous training schedule that he keeps to keep his body in shape is unmatched by any player in the game today. The thousands of repetitions that he shoots, not circus shots but game like shots that he works on to battle any game like situation that comes up. His ability to work on his craft and mentally prepare is what makes him the league's most elite player

## **2.) Killer Instinct**

It's not that hard to score 20+ points in a game especially when your team is up 20 or down 20, but do you have what it takes to destroy your opponent? That is a common trait in the NBA's best player. I can't speak for many other elite stars, but there hasn't been anyone that I've been around that wants to destroy his opponent more than Kobe. When he steps in between that 94 by 50 court he is an assassin that will do anything necessary to put his team in position to win games. There are a lot of players that play the game that have talent, but there are very few that have ice water running through their veins that are nasty people when the going gets tough. I think the biggest trait in a killer instinct is to bring it against a great opponent as well as a weak one. Kobe will go just as hard against the Oklahoma City as he would against the Charlotte Bobcats. A player with a killer instinct squashes their opponent no matter how strong or weak they are. It's easy to talk about having killer instinct, but being cold blooded on the court is a prerequisite of greatness. When you watch Kobe as he's engaged in the game he doesn't smile, he doesn't have fun, he's there to destroy his opponent and win games.

## **3.) Hate Losing More Than You Like Winning**

Great players win games. That's all that matters to them. They can care less about looking at a stat sheet to see how many touches they get. The Only two numbers they look at is their team's total points and their opponent's total points. and God help us all if their team doesn't win. You will never see them clowning around after losses or having a good time. They hate losing more than anything else in the world. It isn't about all-star games or awards. It is about destroying their opponent and winning championships. It could be by 1 point or 100 points, a win is a win. Kobe is all about winning championships. He is hard on teammates when they don't show the same dedication that he shows, not for arrogance or ego but for keeping everyone around him to the same winning standard that he shows. There are so many players that just care about personal accolades rather than wins. It's a big reason for the

separation of good and great players. You should hate losing and understand how to win games over individual accomplishment. It is something that will take you very far.

#### **4.) Have The Guts To Take The Tough Shot In Crunch Time**

It is a completely different galaxy from the flow of the game to the last two minutes. Everyone wants to be the man when the game is easy up 15 down 15 or in the first three quarters of a game. The last 2 minutes where your team is down or only up 1/tied is a different feeling. This is the time where you separate the men from the boys. There are so many players in the game that are good players averaging 18-20 points a game that want no part of the basketball when the game is on the line. It is too tough to deal with putting the on their back and accepting the responsibility to win or lose games based on their shot or shots. Kobe is a player that even at a young age in the NBA to now he always wants the ball in his hands to decide his destiny. We've all witnessed his greatness of making tough shots in the clutch throughout his career but we also have witnessed his misses. Does he get upset? Sure.. Phased or scared??? Hell No!!!! Kobe can miss three straight game winners and be begging for the ball again. He never shies away from adversity and tough situations.....He thrives on it. To be truly a great player you need to be able to want the ball in your hands at any time, especially in crunch time when your team needs you. As a clutch performer you will miss more than half of your shots. The hard part isn't shooting the shot, the hard part is missing the shot and having the courage to want to do it again. Great players want the ball in their hands at all times.

#### **5.) The Ability To Take and Process Coaching**

Our game is overcrowded with players who can't be coached. Too many players today hate to be held accountable. When their coach talks about the things that they do wrong they almost immediately zone them out frequently it turns to confrontation. When they read about their shortcomings in the newspaper they get upset. Great players need to be coached and they need to be held accountable. With my time working with Kobe and critiquing his performance there was never animosity from him. His words were always ok, give me more information on it and it will get fixed. He always accepted criticism as long as it is warranted and always deal with the issues. You never see Kobe lashing out at coaches in the media or in games. His goal is to be the best player and best winner that ever lived and anyone who helps him reach



that goal he will accept with open arms. No one ever truly wants to hear their shortcomings, but receiving constructive criticism from coaches is important to your development. One thing about Kobe is he doesn't respect yes men, he wants people around him that aren't afraid to tell them the truth. The goal is to be the best that you can be and to put your team in the best possible situation to win. Accepting your shortcomings and working to fix the problem is your goal. Let your coaches coach you instead of fighting their comments.

## **6.) Be a Leader**

Being a great player isn't just about playing basketball it is setting an example of how serious you are in being successful. It is a state of mind that needs to be part of your personality. What does it mean to be a leader? It means to not only be on time to practice, but be early. Being a leader means to bring it not only in every game, but also in practice as well. Leaders come into training camp in great shape and stay that way. Kobe Bryant is a born leader. He doesn't lead in just words to his teammates, but by his actions. How does he do this? By working hard not only during the season, but during the summer as well. He doesn't just stress commitment to his team he shows them how dedicated to winning he is by leaving his all on the court everyday. Coming early to practice and staying late isn't a request but a prerequisite. It's not just basketball that defines his leadership it's talking to media, his community service, the way he dresses. He sets an example of how serious he takes basketball on and off the court. Actions speak volumes over words and the only way to lead is to do instead of preach. Great players are professional. The way they talk to authority figures, coaches, fans, and media are all examples of professionalism. Good players turn it on during games and turn it off when the buzzer sounds. Great players turn it on when they wake up and never turn it off. Be a leader not just a player.

## **7.) Play Any Role Necessary To Win**

Everyone wants the ball in their hands and to score points, but in some situations that isn't what will give your team the best chance to win. Great players don't mind shifting their role if it means their teams will have a better chance to win. In Kobe's career he's played so many different roles for the Lakers. Obviously we know Kobe the scorer, but there also is Kobe the facilitator, Kobe the defensive stopper, Kobe the post up player, and Kobe the shot maker. Even though Kobe is an elite scorer, he will sacrifice his scoring to find ways to win. Great players figure out how to win games by any means

necessary. There will be times where you are going to be called upon to be a scorer, but also there will be times where you can help your team in other ways. In the end it is all about winning games and not what numbers you put up. There are plenty of situations where you can be the man and score points. Boys score points and men win games. Everyone in this game has an ego some bigger than others. Eliminate the ego part of your game and be a winner.

### **8.) Be As Dedicated To The Defensive End As You Have To The Offensive End**

Anyone can play hard on the offensive end. A complete player can not only help his team on offense, but also shut his man down on the other end of the court. Great players take pride in giving an effort on the defensive end of the floor. Not every player has the physical attribute to be defensive stoppers like some, but they can become very serviceable team defenders with the ability to help their teammates when their man beats them. I never understand when I see big, strong, and athletic players that give zero effort on defense. The common excuse is that they are saving their energy for the offensive end. Kobe takes his ability to be a dominating defender very seriously. His competitive nature and physical attributes enables him to guard any perimeter player on the planet. His 12 times selected to the NBA All Defensive Team (9 times selected first team) speaks for itself. Kobe wants to be the best winner ever to play the game and knows to do that he needs to be dominant on both ends of the floor. There is no excuse for being at least a serviceable defensive player. If you are a high-end athlete there is no excuse for not being a very good to great defender. No one is too cool to play defense, if one of the greatest players ever can dedicate himself to becoming the best defender that he can be so can't you. Remember being great isn't playing on one half of the court for half the game, it's about being great 100% of the time.

### **9.) Be A Student Of The Game**

With technology today there is no excuse for not being able to study the game. With Youtube, Synergy, High School Cube, Vimeo, and other resources there are plenty of resources to prepare yourself to become a great player. Great players want to scour the Earth to become the best player that they can be. You can study other great players to pick up new techniques to your game or use them to study your opponent. With my four years with Kobe there isn't a player on the planet that studies the game more than him. He'd study hours



of film of his opponent to gather an advantage. He wants to know everything about everybody. Not only his match up, but also what every player on the opposing team like and not like to do. Every play, every defensive coverage, and every weakness is covered by him. The mental edge that he has over his opponent is baffling. Besides being a dominant player on the court Kobe uses his mental edge over his opponent. Don't take the game for granted. If you want to be great at anything you learn everything that there is to learn about it to gather an edge. To be great at anything it can't just be a hobby of yours as it needs to be your passion and obsession. Study the game continue to grow and get better. Take the extra steps to be great.

#### **10.) Trust Your Teammates**

Great players need to include their teammates. No player ever on this Earth can win games by themselves. You need to understand what your teammates can and can't do and put them in positions to help your team win. The difference between winners and losers is that the winner can find a way to get others involved. If you are your team's best player most nights you will see double if not triple teams. There will be players open on almost every possession that you touch the ball. Continue to get them easy shots and trust that they will make plays. There are so many players that just score points by dominating the ball and never passing. Those are the players that average 30 a game and never get out of the first round of the playoffs. They are easy to guard because they are selfish and don't believe in their teammates. Kobe has won five championships. Never were these championships won alone. He made sure other players were involved in the offense. A pass from Kobe like Michael Jordan was a sign of their trust in their teammates. What Kobe understands the more he involves teammates the harder he is to guard as well as the tougher it is to beat the Lakers. Trusting your teammates is such an important step to being a championship level team and instilling a winning culture.

#### **11.) Be Able To Accept The Accolades Of Winning As Well As The Responsibility Of Losing**

It is easy to take credit for when things are going right. When your teams winning it is a great feeling to stick your chest high and take credit for having a major role in your team's success. But with that success will come situations where your teams lose. One of the 11 steps that we mentioned was leadership. It's easy to be a leader when things are going well, but what about

when things aren't going well?? The majority of people on the planet run and hide during the first signs of adversity. So many players can't get away from the camera or journalist when their teams win. But don't want to be within 100 miles of it when their team loses combined with them not playing well. Kobe for as much as he gets attention in wins, gets it when his team doesn't win. He doesn't hide from it as he accepts the fact that the game got away from them that night and answers the tough questions surrounding losses. With the market in which he plays and their stature as a championship organization he faces hard critics that ask every question under the sun. Instead of hiding from things he takes it head on and deals with it. He's a grown man that understands that to become a champion there are steps in which don't always go his way and instead of hiding he deals with it.

## **12.) Sacrifice Your Body**

I mentioned how being a leader and showing by example is such an important trait of a great player. Nothing says this more than a player that sacrifices their body on the basketball court. No matter how good of a player you are making hustle plays and getting on the floor for loose balls is a given. Great players play through pain and adversity to sacrifice for their team. They don't get an ankle sprain and call it a day. They strap on their hard hat, get their treatment, and get on the floor to help their team win. A great player knows that if they don't play through pain than the rest of the team will follow suit. When the best player on the team makes the point of playing hurt and diving all over the floor it sets the standard that every player will be expected to do the same.

I can sit here all day and type the injuries that Kobe Bryant has played through to help his team win. He never makes excuses and takes days off. I've never been around another player that sacrifices his body for his team more than Kobe. The countless sprained ankles, the ligament that he tore in last preseason but kept on playing, and his deformed pinky are just a few of the injuries that he's had to play through. It could have been easy and totally accepted if he took major time off to help those injuries heal. Instead he fought through them for no other reason but to give his team the best chances of winning a championship. There are plenty of players at all levels that claim to be great players, but a simple ache or pain they check out of a game because they can't take the pain. Kobe's mindset is as long as he can get up he'll fight to help his team.



In closing I just want everyone reading this to understand to be great it has nothing to do with reading one sentence phrases. People who just talk about things are not extraordinary people. The people who put the hours of work in on their craft and sacrifice they are the great ones. Nothing makes me more sick than turning on Twitter and Facebook and see people who post nothing but inspirational quotes. Inspirational quotes are fine, but just by saying things won't change anything. You need to change your thinking and your culture and the only way to do that is to get up and get things done. It is easy to put quotes out in the world or list the problems. The really great people in this world identify the problem and works at solving it head on.

Everyday people throw out the word great or elite like it is on sale. One time in the world the word great meant something. There are responsibilities that go with being great in anything. Most people aren't up to the task of being great they just want to say they do. For as many accolades as there is for being great there is a list ten times as long for responsibilities and steps to become great. Study the background and the journey of some of the best that ever played. Some take different journeys and steps, but there is a tremendous separation from being a very good player and a great one.

Our game is filled with good players that go on to play college and pro basketball. There are plenty of good players, but the next level great ones are the ones that are wired differently. They are the ones that give it their all and then take their games to another level. They are dedicated to the cause and are competitive to the end. There is a big difference between being an all-star and a franchise player. A certain few can play at an all-star level, but only the chosen can be great.

Good luck in your quest for it. Some of you will try for greatness most will fail at it but if you don't try at all then don't knock others who do.