

WELCOME TO LA

If the Glove fits and the Mailman delivers, the Lakers are back on top

LAST NOVEMBER, BEFORE THE START OF AN NBA GAME, TWO TEAM CAPTAINS MET at half court to plot their futures. Most such conversations don't amount to much, but this one would have been worth a wiretap. Karl (The Mailman) Malone, then with the Utah Jazz, and Gary Payton, then a Seattle Supersonic, had a lot in common. They were both future Hall Of Famers, unhappy in their respective situations, and soon-to-be free agents. All that was missing from their illustrious resumes was a championship, both having been denied previously by the Michael Jordan-led Chicago Bulls.

As Payton recalled, "Karl could see I wasn't happy. He said, 'Just keep your head up. We might cross paths and play with each other. Don't rule out anything. We'll make everybody's heads roll.'"

Did they ever. Eight months later, the two superstars made an unprecedented decision. Instead of saying "Show me the money," they said, "Show me the ring." In a stunning twist worthy of reality TV, they chose love (of the game) over money, sacrificing millions they could've earned elsewhere, for the chance to win a title with the salary cap-challenged Los Angeles Lakers. Payton, who made \$12.6 million last season, agreed to the mid-level exception of \$4.9 million. Malone, who earned \$19.2 million in 2002, agreed to play for the veteran's minimum of \$1.5 million. Of course, it helps when you're already wealthier than most Third World countries, but even so, it was a remarkably unselfish gesture in an age of avarice. "Karl made it happen," says Payton. "If he hadn't signed, I might've looked at other options."

The repercussions shook the NBA like an eight-plus temblor. Not since David Beckham joined Brazilian soccer star Ronaldo on Real Madrid has one team so gorged themselves on talent. Suddenly, the Lakers are a real Dream Team — of epic proportions. Seventy wins isn't out of the question. A championship seems a foregone conclusion.

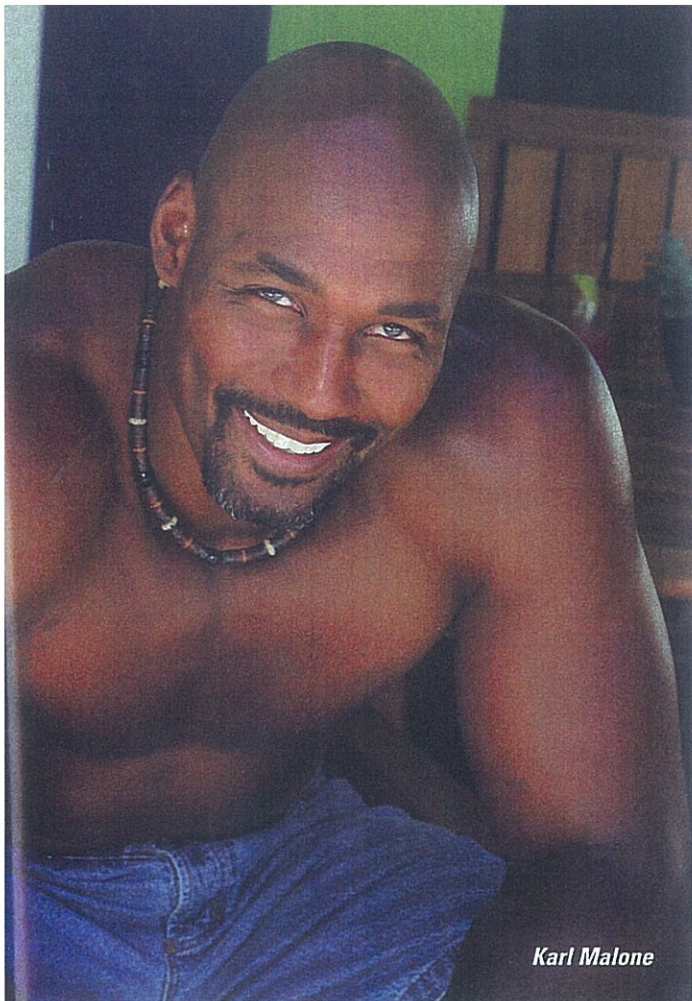
As studies in contrast, the two newest Lakers are a screenwriter's dream: Malone, the 6'9" brutish power forward with a body as hard

as the pick-up truck he drives; and Payton, the 6'4" sinewy guard whose suffocating defense earned him the nickname "The Glove." Malone, the laid-back Arkansas cattle rancher; Payton, the trash-talking street-baller from Oakland. The beginning of a beautiful friendship, perhaps — unless you're a Sacramento Kings fan.

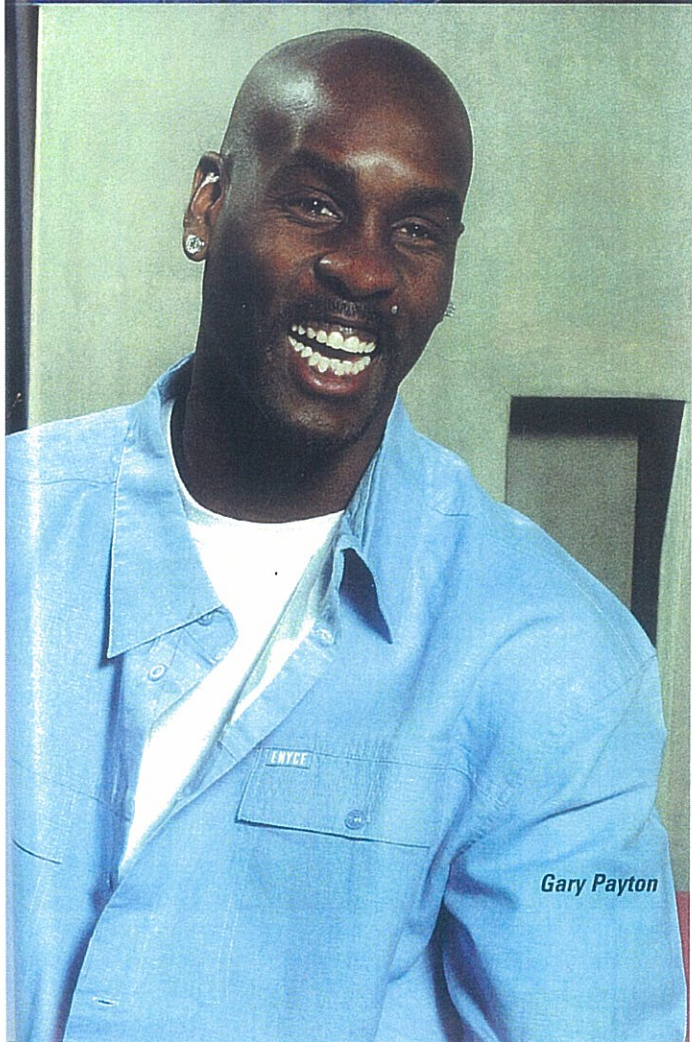
After 18 years in Salt Lake City, Malone is not fazed by the move to Los Angeles. He and his family have bought a house by the ocean ("near Newport Beach," is all he'll tell me) and the Mailman is giddy with excitement. "I feel re-born," he says. "I feel like a kid again." We're sitting inside a cabana at the W Hotel in Westwood, where a shirtless Malone has raised temperatures poolside on an already hot summer afternoon.

Before he signed, Malone was feverishly courted by the team that had dethroned the Lakers as champion, the San Antonio Spurs. But Malone's mind was made up. "All my career, I've wanted to play with a dominant center," he says, and after years of playing with the likes of Mark Eaton and Greg Ostertag, who could blame him? Opponents used to ganging up on Shaquille O'Neal in the low post will now have to worry about Malone burning them from the high post. Even at age 40, he promises to run the floor for 30 to 35 minutes a night. That's because there may be no 40-year-old on the planet who trains as hard — or as obsessively — as Karl Malone.

"I may not have stopped Father Time, but I think I've slowed him enough," he says.



Karl Malone



Gary Payton

"EVERYBODY WANTS US TO FAIL," SAYS PAYTON. "EVERY TEAM WILL BE GUNNING FOR US. IF WE DON'T WIN, THEY'LL SAY WE'RE A FLOP."

Statistically, his legacy is assured. Malone is the only player in NBA history to tally 35,000 points, 10,000 rebounds, 4,000 assists, and 2,000 steals. Sometime next year, assuming he stays healthy, he will surpass Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the league's all-time leading scorer. While he acknowledges the magnitude of that achievement, says Malone. "If it's meant to happen, I want to do it within the team concept."

Critics wonder whether Malone, accustomed to being "The Man" in Utah, will adapt to being a third, even fourth scoring option in Phil Jackson's triangle offense. But Malone scoffs at such doubts. "It's not a matter of 'can we share the ball,'" he says. "We're part of a system, with offensive and defensive schemes. The triangle is a passing offense, based on movement. You try to create easy shots. Run the floor; post up; cut to the basket; keep moving. Fundamental basketball."

"We're all All-Stars. We've all scored a lot of points," he adds. "Now let's see what we can be like as a team." And while some might think four strong personalities could be divisive, Malone relishes the opportunity. "Each guy's going to push and bring the best out of each other," he asserts. "I lead by example. If I'm still willing to learn, then Kobe and Shaq have to be willing to learn."

If last year in Seattle was the winter of Gary Payton's discontent, this summer is different. Reached at his home in Las Vegas, Payton sounded relaxed and confident. He and his family are closing on a house in Bel Air, Lakers fans have already shown him the love, and he's ready to get down to business. At 34, he's still got some prime years ahead of him.

The fiery floor leader who can score, dish, and shut down the opposition's best guard sounds content to be the playmaker, dishing to the big fellas, and easing the defensive burden on Kobe Bryant. The Lakers would be thrilled if Payton can duplicate his career averages of 18 points and seven assists a game.

"Phil is looking for me to be the General," Payton says. "He's going to give us more options to freelance and create mismatches. If they want to double Shaq, he can kick it out to three guys who can score. Everyone thinks we're going to be ball-hogging with each other. It's not going to happen. Me and Karl are going to be fine."

Payton acknowledges he's got some big shoes to fill where Malone is concerned. For 14 years, the Mailman ran the pick-and-roll to perfection with John Stockton, Utah's non-

the games

pareil backcourt general. "I can be the baby Stockton, feeding him the ball on the break," Payton says. "Me and Karl want to run, and I just have to practice with him, get a feel for where he likes the ball."

Just as the Lakers began to dream of an idyllic season, Kobe Bryant's legal troubles shifted the emphasis from the court to the courtroom. But Payton insists that Bryant's play will not be distracted by the shadow of Bryant's impending sexual assault trial. "We'll take him in, make sure he's not going off by himself and thinking about it," Payton says calmly. "If he plays the way he normally does, if he gets 30-40 points and leads us to victory night after night, no one's going to be asking about the trial." While Kobe will no doubt be supported at Staples Center, all bets are off on the road (and mark January 7 on your calendar, when the Lakers visit Denver). "He's a very strong individual," Payton declares. "He can get through this."

Aware that this Lakers team will be scrutinized like no

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other, both players agree that anything less than a championship is unacceptable. "Everybody wants us to fail," says Payton. "Every team will be gunning for us. If we don't win, they'll say we're a flop."

Malone agrees: "Right from pre-season, we've got to beat people early, show 'em we're confident." Left unspoken is the real possibility that this group may only be together for one season. Both players signed two-year contracts, but can opt out next summer. Kobe Bryant has already indicated he'd like to test the free-agent market in 2004. There's no learning curve here. The time is now.

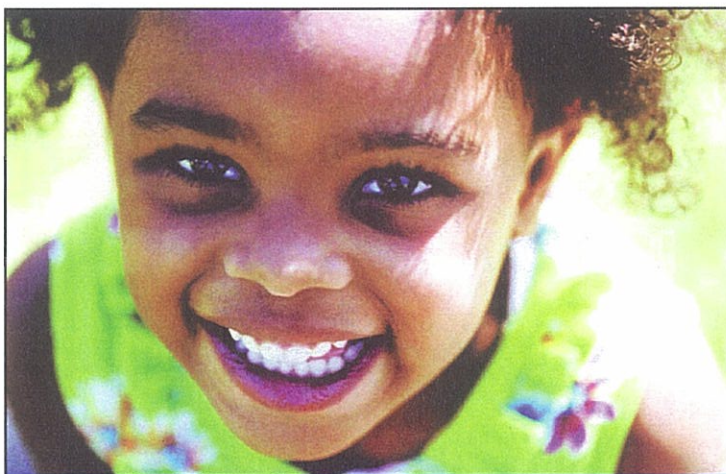
History has not always been kind to Dream Teams, be they in sports or business. The Lakers of Jerry West, Wilt Chamberlain, and Elgin Baylor didn't win a championship until Baylor retired. Scottie Pippen, Charles Barkley, and Hakeem Olajuwon were a bust in Houston. The merger of AOL and Time Warner failed

to live up to the hype. Right now, though, nobody cares about the past. "If we're healthy, we expect to be in the Finals and win a championship," Malone says.

Few would disagree. **B**

— Graham Flashner

Photographed by Thyronne Millaud
at The W Hotel in Westwood



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