

New Spurs preserve old rivalry

By Johnny Ludden, Yahoo! Sports Jan 15, 6:51 am EST



SAN ANTONIO – Kobe Bryant channeled his inner Sam Cassell, dancing along the sideline, serving up a healthy plate of *huevos grandes* moments after he had driven a 3-point dagger into the heart of South Texas. [Roger Mason Jr.](#) watched Bryant taunt the crowd. As he turned to walk toward the bench, the newest member of the [San Antonio Spurs](#) knew what he wanted.

A chance.

That's all the Spurs have ever wanted against Bryant and the Los Angeles Lakers, and what happened next explains why they woke up Thursday morning thinking they still have one. Mason walked back onto the court, caught a pass that wasn't supposed to go to him, stuck his hip into Derek Fisher and threw in an 18-footer. This time, unlike eight months earlier, the whistle blew.

"We're fortunate," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said after Mason's three-point play with 10.5 seconds left handed the Lakers just their seventh loss of the season. "What goes around comes around."

For more than a decade now, it's been this way between these teams. The Spurs swept the Lakers from the playoffs on their way to a championship in 1999. When they met again two years later, the Lakers returned the favor. Robert Horry's final-second 3-pointer, one of the last he took for L.A., dropped three-quarters of the way through the rim before popping out to give the Spurs a series-turning Game 5 victory in 2003. In Game 5 the following year, Fisher stunned the Spurs with his .4 heroics.

Then came last season's Western Conference finals. Stretched to a seventh game by the New Orleans Hornets, forced to spend the night on their grounded jet, the Spurs staggered into Los Angeles, took a 20-point lead and watched Bryant rush the Lakers past them. Down two in Game 4, Brent Barry spotted up for the potential winning shot and watched Fisher land on his shoulder. No foul came, and the league later announced its officiating crew blew the call.

So when Trevor Ariza drove into a crowd of Spurs on Wednesday's final possession? And was whistled for a travel when the Lakers thought he had been tripped?

Bryant shrugged.

"It's the least we can do to return the favor," he said, "after Fish .4-ed them."

The Lakers have little reason to fret over the loss. If anything, it further emboldened them. They came to San Antonio 24 hours after a tough victory in Houston, missing three rotation players, and still erased an 11-point deficit against a healthy team that had enjoyed two days of rest. Lamar Odom's bruised knee hasn't completely healed and Fisher had to leave briefly Wednesday after tweaking his groin. Yes, the Lakers are hurting. But neither their injuries nor their loss to San Antonio blemishes their best-in-the-West status. When the Spurs visit L.A. in 10 days, the verdict could be decidedly different.

As Lakers coach Phil Jackson said, "We won everything but the free-throw line."

Still, Jackson and Bryant also know these games against the Spurs often come down to one free throw, one shot, one call, and that's why San Antonio sees reason to believe. After all, isn't Mason growing into Big Shot Jr.?

Robert Horry was in the building on Wednesday, sitting in the box of Spurs general manager RC Buford. He built a career with similar heroics, and he smiled after the thrilling finish.

Mason doesn't have Horry's seven rings. He's appeared in just 10 playoff games, and June heat has a way of melting the hearts of even the most experienced players.

But so far for these Spurs, Mason has looked smart and fearless. Ask the Phoenix Suns. Mason ruined their Christmas with a 3-pointer at the buzzer. He buried another winning three with 8.4 seconds left to beat the Clippers in November.

"He has the confidence to do it," Popovich said, "and he has the license to do it."

That says something considering Mason shares the floor with Tim Duncan, Manu Ginobili and Tony Parker. Spurs officials would like to tell you they knew Mason was this cold-blooded, but they didn't. Mason might not have even known, having spent the past two seasons with the Washington Wizards and Gilbert Arenas.

"Gilbert wouldn't let me take that shot with him on the floor," Mason said. "And then when he was gone, Caron Butler wouldn't let me take the winning shot with him on the floor."

Still, the Spurs have long seen *something* in Mason. They worked him out in their gym in the summers of '06 and '07, but never extended the type of guaranteed offer to make him stay. Assistant coach Mike Budenholzer continued to push for Mason. Popovich and Buford listened.

"He was one of those players that Pop talked about," Ginobili said.

After flirting with Corey Maggette and J.R. Smith this past summer, the Spurs handed Mason a two-year, \$7.3 million contract. More than a few rival execs thought San Antonio overpaid. But in a season of high-priced busts (Maggette, Baron Davis and Elton Brand to name a few), has any free agent produced more value for the dollar?

Mason wasn't the only bargain the Spurs found over the summer. Rookie George Hill was taken late in the first round and looked ready to play himself off the roster after one summer-league game. Now he gives the Spurs a steady 12-15 minutes a night backing up Parker.

Neither Hill (10 points and four rebounds) nor Mason, who made three 3-pointers among his 18 points, looked rattled against the Lakers. Another sign of how much the Spurs have changed: Mason was assigned as the primary defender on Bryant. Bruce Bowen, who has shadowed Bryant for eight seasons, left his seat on the bench for all of six minutes.

Mason didn't do much to deter Bryant, but he's at least quickly learned how much the Spurs value defense. During Sunday's loss to the Orlando Magic, he blew a key possession by doubling Dwight Howard at the expense of leaving J.J. Redick for an open 3-pointer. Popovich promptly sat Mason.

"Everything here is a learning process," Mason said. "It's all about building up for the playoffs."

Until then, the Spurs will likely chase the Lakers. They can't match L.A.'s depth or length, and that's why they've made no secret of their desire to add another big man, preferably one who can space the floor, before the trade deadline. The problem: About 25 other teams could use the same, and the Spurs don't have much to offer in return. As unlikely as a reunion with Horry is, team officials won't say they've completely ruled it out.

For now, January victories don't mean much in either San Antonio or Los Angeles. But the Spurs saw a few reasons to think they'll be a factor when the playoffs begin. Duncan just missed a triple-double, and Ginobili – who limped through the Lakers series on an injured left ankle – finally looked like the player who led them for much of last season, scoring 27 points in a dazzling performance.

"Playing a team like the Lakers ... it made me feel good," Ginobili said. "And I used it."

The Lakers and Spurs usually bring out the best in each other, and their latest meeting was no different. Seconds after Ariza drained a 3-pointer over him, Ginobili answered from 29 feet at the third-quarter buzzer. Duncan threw in a shot over his shoulder while stumbling away from the basket. Bryant followed with his dagger.

"This is the highest level of play I've seen from two teams all season," one scout said.

Mason got his first taste of the rivalry when he bought a ticket to Game 5 of last season's West finals while visiting Los Angeles. He watched the Lakers run over the Spurs to close out the series, not knowing he would decide their next meeting.

So eight months later and 12 seconds left, there stood Mason. Bryant had just silenced the frenzied crowd, and Popovich drew up a play to put the game in Ginobili's hands. The newest Spur walked out of the huddle and told himself this: If I get the ball, I'm shooting.

Mason got his chance. Come May, he just might give the Spurs theirs.