

Bryant, Lakers reign once more

ORLANDO—Kobe Bryant has the NBA title he needed most — the one without Shaq.

Bryant's seven-year chase of a coveted championship is over. He's got his fourth, and Los Angeles coach Phil Jackson his record 10th, a ring for each finger. One year after failing in the finals, Bryant and the Lakers have redemption, and all the rewards that go with it.

They earned their 15th title on Sunday night as Bryant scored 30 points and Pau Gasol added 14 and 15 rebounds in a 99-86 win in Game 5 over the Orlando Magic, who ran out of comebacks.

It took longer than Bryant expected, but he has stepped out of former teammate Shaquille O'Neal's enormous shadow — at last. His fourth championship secured a strong case can be made for Bryant being the league's best player since Michael Jordan hung up his sneakers.

His coach stands alone.

Jackson, the chilled-out, bow-legged Zen Master who won six league titles in the 1990s with Jordan in Chicago, now has won No. 4 with Los Angeles and broke a tie with legendary Boston coach Red Auerbach as the winningest coach in finals history.

"I'll smoke the cigar tonight in memory of Red," Jackson said. "He was a great guy."

Bryant and Jackson, whose relationship strained and briefly snapped under the weight of success, are again at the top of their games.

Together.

Nothing was going to stop Bryant, who spent the postseason scowling, snarling, baring his teeth and all but breathing fire at anything in his path. For weeks, the All-Star has worn his game face, and only when the victory was his in the final seconds did the finals MVP allow himself to smile.

After the final horn, he leaped into the air and was quickly engulfed by his teammates, who



Los Angeles Lakers' Kobe Bryant kisses his daughter, Gianna, after beating the Orlando Magic 99-86 in Game 5 to win the NBA basketball finals today in Orlando, Florida. AP Photo

The Kobe Show.

They got help from their entire roster as Odom, Trevor Ariza and Andrew Bynum, who missed most of last season and the playoffs with a knee injury, came through.

And even O'Neal, now with the Phoenix Suns, was glad to see the Lakers finish the job.

"Congratulations kobe, u deserve it," O'Neal said on Twitter page. "You played great. Enjoy it my man enjoy it." (AP)

bounced around the floor of Amway Arena. Bryant then gave a long, heartfelt hug and shared a few words with Jackson before sweeping up his daughters, both wearing gold Lakers dresses, into his arms.

"It's so tough to win championships," Bryant said. "We started over from scratch. Here we are again. This really feels like a dream."

After beating Utah in the first round, Los Angeles was forced to go seven games against Houston, which lost center Yao Ming to an injury. The Lakers then took care of Denver in six games, setting up a matchup with the shoot-from-their-hips Magic, who made their first visit to the finals since O'Neal took them there in 1995.

Orlando will be haunted by moments in a series that swung on a few plays and had two overtime games.

After losing Game 1 by 25 points, the Magic had their chance in Game 2 but rookie Courtney Lee missed an alley-oop layup in the final second of regulation. In Game 4, Dwight Howard changed two free throws with 11.1 seconds, and the Magic allowed Derek Fisher to nail a game-tying 3-pointer to force OT.

As teammates, Bryant and O'Neal were nearly unbeatable on the court. Off it, there were problems.

The Lakers were anything but

Pacquiao...

PAGE A1

Pacquiao stayed at the swanky St. Regis Hotel on Fifth Avenue, and it was in his suite, which may cost close to \$5,000 a night, where he gave Arum the go-signal for set up of the Cotto fight.

"Now, it's just the economics," Arum told *The Star*.

Pacquiao, who was scheduled to be back in Manila late last night, should get the lion's share against Cotto, who has never fought under 145 lb. in his last eight fights, and losing only once, to Antonio Margarito.

The lion's share could mean 70 percent of everything. Pacquiao wants to fight Cotto at 142 lb but the latter said he can't go lower than 145 lb. Now they must agree on something in between.

Arum said Floyd Mayweather Jr. postponing his July 18 fight with Juan Manuel Marquez due to a rib injury sustained in training means the undefeated ex-pound-for-pound champion can't fight Pacquiao this year.

It was reported on the Internet that one more reason that led to the postponement was the poor ticket sales. With only 11 weeks before the fight, \$300 tickets are still available by the 10s per fight fan.

When Pacquiao fought Oscar dela Hoya last December and Ricky Hatton last May, the cheapest tickets were gone barely hours after the booths opened so many weeks before the fights.

Pacquiao's trainer, Freddie Roach, said he wants the Mayweather fight next, and neither Cotto nor (Shane) Mosley, but now the three-time Trainer of the Year must change his thoughts.

"Mayweather postponing the fight against Marquez means he can't fight Manny this year. Now it's just Cotto, Mosley or Edwin Valero. But the biggest fight out there for Manny is Cotto," said Arum. ■

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