

LAKERS

Jerry West weighs in on the Warriors and new-look Lakers

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The surest way to get on Jerry West's bad side, the best way to get him to bark in that familiar voice with its tendrils of a West Virginia twang, is to praise him.

For reasons understood only by West — who subtitled his autobiography “My charmed, tormented life” — he detests being commended for anything, especially his charitable efforts. Not because he'd be found wanting: He has long supported a reading center at West Virginia University in memory of his older brother, David, who died in the Korean War, and he has backed various charities in Southern California through his life as a player, coach and executive with the Lakers and beyond.

His distaste for acclaim, perhaps a product of his instinct to value the team above the individual, remains a constant in his personality at age 78. But that doesn't mean his good work should be ignored.

San Pedro-based Sharefest, which encourages volunteering in communities and helping youngsters mature into leaders, on Saturday will give West its Bill Sharman Humanitarian Award, named for the late Lakers Hall of Fame coach and executive. Sharman's widow, Joyce, will chair the event, which will celebrate West's leadership in the community.

Receiving an award named for Sharman is an achievement that even West must consider very much worth winning, right?

“I’m not one who likes to be honored, to be honest with you. That’s never been who I am,” West said in a phone conversation last week. “Simply because of my involvement with Bill over the years and who he was as a person, I’m more than happy to accept it and try to make some of his and Joyce’s work in the community carry on.”

That has been West’s mission, too, a less-public part of his life he has carried on through his role as an executive board member of the Golden State Warriors and, always, a keen observer of the Lakers.

West enjoyed almost unfathomable triumphs in the NBA with the Lakers as a player and as an executive who molded six championship teams. After he left the organization, he breathed life into the Memphis Grizzlies as their general manager and later brought his expertise to the Golden State Warriors. In 2015, they provided his seventh NBA championship as a team executive.

Despite all his success — or maybe because of it — he still carries the memory of being a lonely kid who never believed he was good enough and had to work relentlessly for everything he had. If he can make it easier for other kids to realize the dreams that have come true for him, if his support for small charities can make a big impact on children who can use their education and leadership skills to improve their communities, he’s as happy as he was after any of his victories on the court.

“Anything you can do to help someone, I just think it’s so important because there’s a lot of kids that look up athletes of all size and shapes in a lot of different fields, not necessarily in the basketball field,” he said. “They get involved emotionally with those people because there’s something about certain athletes that people rally around. I think the most important thing is when you walk away, do people think you were a good guy, along with being a productive person as a player?”

“I’ve always felt that, and I don’t want to understate how proud I was to play the game at maybe a little bit different level than most people and more importantly to feel like

being involved with three organizations. It's been fun for me to watch those organizations thrive and prosper. It's been a huge part of my life."

And it always will be.

His voice becomes infused with passion when he discusses the Warriors, whom he said "should be the most fun team in the league to watch because of the dynamics of a few of our players." He added, "I hear people talk about sharing the ball, and that will not be a problem with this team at all, period. I think our biggest problem will be to really focus and compete on a higher level. Because every night you're going to be getting the other team's best shot because of all the things that are written about so-called super teams. That hasn't been proven yet, but this is a very, very capable team, and some of the players we have are the most dynamic in basketball. To have that many on one team is probably unheard of."

He also likes the Lakers' direction and the teach-first, worry-about-wins-later approach chosen by Coach Luke Walton, who was an assistant with the Warriors. The Lakers' older players, West said, can play key roles in showing the younger ones how to be consistently competitive. "If they can play at a higher level I think that will encourage the younger players to be better players, to be players that can be productive not for now but a few years and to try to build a future and forget about the past," West said.

"I think too many people live in the past. And this is not the Lakers that many of our fans have watched over the years. This is, hopefully, the start of a new trend for them to be on the upswing and have some hope for the coming years. These young players that they have, and they have two, three young ones that are talented, those are the players that hopefully will become kind of iconic names in the city of Los Angeles."

That's high praise coming from one of the most iconic players ever to grace a field of play in this city, or any other. It's tough to escape praising him — again.

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