

THE SPORTIER

Kobe Bryant, Hall of Famer

On Saturday night, a night highlighted by the Hall of Fame inductions of star basketball players and speeches from Tim Duncan and Kevin Garnett, it was the posthumous induction of a player that stuck with everybody the most: the induction of Kobe Bryant.

As everybody knows, Kobe Bryant was a legend in the sport of basketball. In his 20 year career with the Los Angeles Lakers, he amassed 5 NBA Titles, 18 All-Star appearances, 10 First Team All-NBA selections, 2 Finals MVPs, and 1 MVP award. Kobe's legacy is defined by not his accolades, but by his mindset as a person. The "Mamba Mentality" mindset was made synonymous with intensity and grit, and is named after Kobe's extreme work ethic that was matched by no other. Things like getting in the gym first and leaving last and playing through injuries that would stop almost everybody else defined Kobe as a person, and showed how committed he was not only to the Lakers organization, but to the game of basketball itself. Further off of the court, Kobe was the first former professional athlete to win an Academy Award. His short film "Dear Basketball" won the award for Best Animated Short Film at the Oscars in 2018, which was based on the poem he wrote announcing his retirement from the NBA. Kobe was a man of many talents, and he was continuously looking to make a positive impact on the world in any way that he could. Unfortunately, on January 26, 2020, Kobe would tragically lose his life in a helicopter crash. Among the 9 total passengers including Kobe on the flight, all of whom sadly lost their lives, was Kobe's 13-year-old daughter Gianna Bryant. Gianna was a great basketball player herself, and was primed to become a future WNBA star.

Kobe's speech was delivered by his wife, Vanessa Bryant. Walking her up the stage was Kobe's favorite player and basketball idol, Michael Jordan. Though there is no telling what the great storyteller in Kobe Bryant would have said to the audience at his Hall of Fame Induction speech, his wife gave an excellent speech that gave everybody better insight into who Kobe really was.

Discussed by many is Kobe's insane commitment to the game of basketball, even through injury. Vanessa Bryant pointed out one of the many instances of this as when Kobe sank two free throws after suffering an Achilles injury in 2013, and later walking to the locker room. Vanessa, who had a deeper connection with Kobe than anybody else, elaborated on why he continued playing through injuries that nobody else would. She said, "Kobe didn't want to disappoint his fans, especially the ones in the 300 sections who saved up to watch him play, the kids with the same excitement he once had." Vanessa nodded to Michael Jordan after mentioning that Kobe had grown up wanting to, just like all other kids, "Be Like Mike." Kobe had a passion for basketball that was unmatched, and he wanted to invite as many people as possible to share in his love for the game.

Vanessa, who stayed strong throughout the whole speech, also thanked her husband himself. Without him there, she didn't know who he wanted to thank, but she knew that he deserved all of the credit for the commitment and sacrifices he made to not only basketball, but to his family and other ventures. She understood that Kobe would never thank himself to this degree, but she also understood that Kobe deserved all of the praise that he received.

Perhaps the most powerful moment of the speech was the end. Vanessa didn't waver in her voice until her final words, and the culmination of one of the most impactful Hall of Fame Induction speeches of all time ended with words that will stick with basketball fans across the globe.

"You're a true champ. You're not just an MVP, you're an all-time great. I'm so proud of you. I love you forever and always, Kobe Bean Bryant."

The NBA Playoffs - What is the Play-In Tournament?

After Sunday night's NBA action, the NBA playoffs are finally set. There are several storylines that have taken over the league throughout this shortened, 72-game regular season. From the Utah Jazz ending as the league's best team, to the resurgence of the New York Knicks, to the rapid fall of the Los Angeles Lakers down the Western Conference standings late in the season, this NBA season feels like it's just getting started. Tonight, a new layer of the NBA playoffs will be introduced: the play-in tournament. Though you may have heard of the term, how does this new addition to the NBA postseason work?

The play-in tournament was brought to the NBA last season in a brief capacity. The NBA finished its regular season play and its entire playoffs in the 2020 season in the NBA Bubble in Orlando. To give all teams a more fair playing field, especially after an extended period of time away from the game of basketball, the NBA instituted a play-in tournament of sorts. This new rule would allow for the 9 seed to play a short series against the 8 seed if they finished within 4 games of each other. In 2020, both the Portland Trail Blazers (8 seed) and the Memphis Grizzlies (9 seed) did in fact finish just 0.5 games apart. The guidelines of the play-in tournament stated that the 8 seed began the series with a 1-0 lead in a best of 3 series. If the 8 seed won the first meeting between the two teams, then the series would end; the 8 seed would enter the playoffs as usual. If the 9 seed happened to win the first meeting, the series would be locked at 1-1. The team to win this potential third game would advance to the playoffs as the 8 seed, playing the 1 seed as an 8 seed would. In 2020, the Trail Blazers defeated the Grizzlies in their first play-in game meeting, sending them to the playoffs without another game necessary.

The 2021 NBA Playoffs looks to implement a similar system, but allowing more teams to be competitive for the playoffs. One new change to the play-in tournament for this season is that both conferences automatically have play-in games. The play-in games cover the teams seeded 7-10 in their respective conferences. In the East, the teams that fall into this category, in order of best seed to worst, are the Celtics, Wizards, Pacers, and Hornets. In the West, in somewhat shocking fashion, the teams in the play-in games are the Lakers, Warriors, Grizzlies, and Spurs. To accommodate for this influx in teams added to this new round, the NBA has modified the system of teams can advance. Here is a summary of how the play-in tournament will work:

The 7 seed will play the 8 seed, and the 9 seed will play the 10 seed. The winner of the game between the 7 and 8 seeds will automatically advance to the playoffs, taking over the 7 seed in their conference. The 7 seed would face the 2 seed in the playoffs. In the East, the 2 seed is the Brooklyn Nets, and in the West, the 2 seed is the Phoenix Suns. The winner of the matchup between the 9 and 10 seeds will face off against the loser of the game between the 7 and 8 seeds. The winner of this game will become the 8 seed in their conference, and will face off against the 1 seed in the playoffs. In the East, the 1 seed is the Philadelphia 76ers, and in the West, the 1 seed is the Utah Jazz. The loser of the game between 9 and 10 seeds will automatically be eliminated from playoff contention.

This system, while encouraging for less tanking in the NBA, a league that has been plagued with the issue of teams intentionally putting a poor product on the field for the sake of acquiring better talent in the draft, has seen many people unhappy with the new setup. In 2018, LeBron James called the idea of a play-in tournament "wack," but was an advocate for the modified play-in tournament last season. Recently, he has stated that "Whoever came up with that s*** needs to be fired," expressing his distaste for the tournament. LeBron's Lakers are currently the 7 seed, and in a traditional NBA playoff format, the 7 seed would automatically make the playoffs. In the play-in tournament, the 7 seed is not guaranteed to make the playoffs. Additionally, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban called the play-in tournament an "enormous mistake." Though his team was, at the time of his statement, slated to be in the play-in tournament, the Mavericks have moved into the position of the 5 seed in the Western Conference, leaving them out of these additional games.

While the initiative of the play-in tournament has been greeted with mixed reviews, it is a brand new method to combat the issue of tanking that plagues the league. Even if some disagree with this new system, it will surely add great excitement for fans and generate buzz around the league. The play-in tournament begins tonight, and so does a brand new era of NBA playoff basketball.

Play-In Tournament Predictions

Eastern Conference

7 (Celtics) vs 8 (Wizards): Wizards def. Celtics
9 (Pacers) vs 10 (Hornets): Hornets def. Pacers
7 (Celtics) vs 10 (Hornets): Hornets def. Celtics

Teams Advancing to the Playoffs:
7th Seed in Playoffs - Washington Wizards
8th Seed in Playoffs - Charlotte Hornets

Western Conference

7 (Lakers) vs 8 (Warriors): Lakers def. Warriors
9 (Grizzlies) vs 10 (Spurs): Grizzlies def. Spurs
8 (Warriors) vs 9 (Grizzlies): Warriors def. Grizzlies

Teams Advancing to the Playoffs:
7th Seed in Playoffs - Los Angeles Lakers
8th Seed in Playoffs - Golden State Warriors



MAY 15, 2021 - VANESSA BRYANT DELIVERS A HALL OF FAME INDUCTION SPEECH ON BEHALF OF HER HUSBAND, KOBE BRYANT

Sources:

[Sporting News](#), [USA Today](#), [Yahoo! Sports](#), [MassLive](#), [ESPN](#), [Sports Illustrated](#)