

Athletes to Watch at the Beijing Olympics: Kobe Bryant

If you follow the NBA (National Basketball Association), you're already familiar with the outstanding play of the 2007-08 NBA Most Valuable Player, Kobe Bryant. If you aren't immediately knowledgeable of his abilities, you're not going to want to miss him in action during the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Kobe Bryant is one of the most skilled and most exciting athletes in the world, and perhaps the world's greatest basketball player. Bryant began his professional career at age 18, deciding to skip college to go directly to professional basketball at its highest level- the NBA. Within a short amount of time, it became clear that his team, the Los Angeles Lakers, had something special on their hands.

During his career, he quickly won three world championships, leading the Lakers along with fellow NBA All-Star Shaquille O'Neal. After years of playing together, a number of circumstances, including a supposed feud that both players downplayed, led to O'Neal's departure, but Bryant continued to have individual, if not team, success. Since then, Bryant has won the NBA scoring title, and been honored for his defensive play as well.

The United States basketball team is in dire need of a leader like Kobe Bryant, and they are lucky to have him as they attempt to reclaim their place at the top of the international basketball community. Bryant plays with a fire that the United States team has lacked in recent years. In 2004's Sydney Olympic Games, the United States lost three games while settling for the bronze medal. To put the disappointment into perspective, the three losses in 2004 are more than the United States had previously experienced in their complete Olympic history. In 2006, the U.S. team's performance wasn't much better at the World Championships, which resulted in another third place finish.

Kobe Bryant appears to be motivated to change his country's fortunes in Beijing this summer. Even though he's been playing with a torn ligament in his right pinky finger (on his shooting hand, nonetheless), he has publicly stated that he would not undergo surgery until after the Olympic Games in Beijing were completed. This kind of statement speaks volumes about the dedication Bryant is showing towards his nation's team, and the determination he has to return the U.S. to the top of the podium in Beijing.

Not only is Bryant one of the most talented performers in the world, but he's also one of the most exciting. Bryant is capable of mid-air acrobatics, last second heroics, and incredible shots that defy physics, even when he is being guarded closely by multiple defenders. At times, it seems that there is no

force that can stop Bryant from doing what he wants to do on the basketball court.

Bryant is also becoming increasingly fun to watch because he has learned to involve his teammates more than he previously did earlier in his career. This will lead to more opportunities for them as well as himself, since opponents can't simply double team him like they would early in his playing days. His evolution into more of a team player will also help the United States change their identity as a team. After the "dream team" experiment continued to disappoint, the team has changed to a more balanced team filled with role players as well as stars. Bryant's new philosophy will fit perfectly with the style of basketball that the United States needs to play to win.

Whether you're a fan of United States basketball or not, you'll want to watch whenever they play, if only because of the superlative talent and ability of Kobe Bryant. Not since the great Michael Jordan have we been blessed with the opportunity to watch such an excellent player in his prime, and with Bryant more motivated than ever to bring the United States another gold medal, he's sure to be at his best this summer in Beijing.

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Word Count 656