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Bryant's Nimble Footwork Is Mesmerizing the Magic

By JONATHAN ABRAMS

LOS ANGELES — With footwork developed in another country and influenced by another sport, [Kobe Bryant](#) created an on-court ballet that has little basis in basketball. But it has been a highly effective tool in his chosen sport, evolving into one of the most potent aspects of his offensive repertory with the [Los Angeles Lakers](#).



With the ball in his hands and his dribble alive, **Bryant turns to an intricate series of jab steps, pivots, turns and twists**. Specialist defenders who face him several times a season — like San Antonio's Bruce Bowen and Houston's Shane Battier — are more in tune with Bryant's sequence and stand a chance of at least impeding his progress. Others try to anticipate his moves but are often left

performing jumping jacks in vain, staggering off balance or twisting into a human pretzel.

With nifty footwork, the game's elite players reduce the sport to simple geometry, finding the best angle for their shots while neutralizing defenders.

"You've got to try and anticipate a little bit," said the Orlando rookie Courtney Lee, who is earning his stripes by guarding Bryant in the N.B.A finals, with Game 2 on Sunday night. "But you don't want to anticipate too much. He has that **great footwork**, and you can think he's going one way, and he'll feel you and **make the right pivot** and go the other way."

It is not the shoes. It is who wears the shoes.

Bryant took baby steps toward learning those moves while playing soccer in Italy, where he spent part of his childhood and where his father, Joe Bryant, played basketball. His feet touched the ball as much as a basketball now meets his hands.

When cousins in the United States sent him videos of N.B.A. games, **Bryant studied the feet** of Hakeem Olajuwon, Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley.

“I’ve always worked on it, always worked on it since I was a kid,” Bryant said. “I just watched different players — Olajuwon, Michael, Charles — and just all kinds of footwork and just tried to emulate them. Playing soccer, I think, had a lot to do with it as well. It’s just growing up overseas.”

Eventually, Bryant teamed with Lakers Coach Phil Jackson, who used to have other great **job steppers**. When Jackson coached the Chicago Bulls, he walked into the team’s training center one day and found Scottie Pippen tutoring Jordan on a corner sequence. “Because Scottie could make the **footwork** and dunk with his left hand, and Michael always envied that,” Jackson said.

Jackson also appreciated the value of other sports. Before the draft, he used to ask prospects about their athletic experiences.

“Basketball is a very skilled sport,” Jackson said. “But we need guys that can throw the basketball like a baseball and we like guys that have **footwork like in soccer.**”

As Bryant’s game advanced, his appetite for watching film grew. He seldom goes anywhere without a DVD player so he can study highlights and the tendencies of opponents.

“There’s some things that we’ve always worked with him on, particularly where he gets his shots from and how he got his shots,” Jackson said. **“Footwork has always been something he’s worked at on his own.”**

In Game 1 of the finals Thursday night, Lee and Mickael Pietrus were mostly helpless bystanders against Bryant, who put on a clinic of sound fundamentals in the Lakers’ 100-75 victory over the Magic. Bryant scored 40 points, his most in a finals game, many of them by freeing himself for midrange jump shots.

“He has great footwork; he has great body control,” said Pietrus, who guarded LeBron James in the Eastern Conference finals only to have his hands full again with Bryant. “He has great everything. Compared to LeBron, he’s very different because he’s

moving a lot and he knows how to get you unbalanced to make his shot. He's Kobe Bryant, so I'm not surprised."

Although Bryant and Jordan were originally known for their high-flying theatrics, many contend that as their careers advanced, **their footwork** helped maintain the quality of their game.

"All good players have the same DNA in that regards," said the Lakers assistant Jim Clemons, who had the same role with Jordan's Bulls. "**If you're going to start building a foundation, footwork is part of it.** It's part of being athletic. Michael, I would throw right up there at the top with anybody I've ever been associated with. Same with Kobe"

Bryant senses when a defender is vulnerable.

"Just depends on what he's doing and what I feel," he said. "I just react instinctively."

Defenders also have to deal with other parts of Bryant's game.

"It's his mind frame," Battier said. "That's what sets him apart. There are guys with, I wouldn't say equal skill, but there are really skilled guys. What sets him apart is his relentlessness. He never quits. Never quits. That's his biggest strength."

Before pausing, Battier added: "**Got pretty good footwork**, too. He doesn't give you much."

Howard Beck contributed reporting.