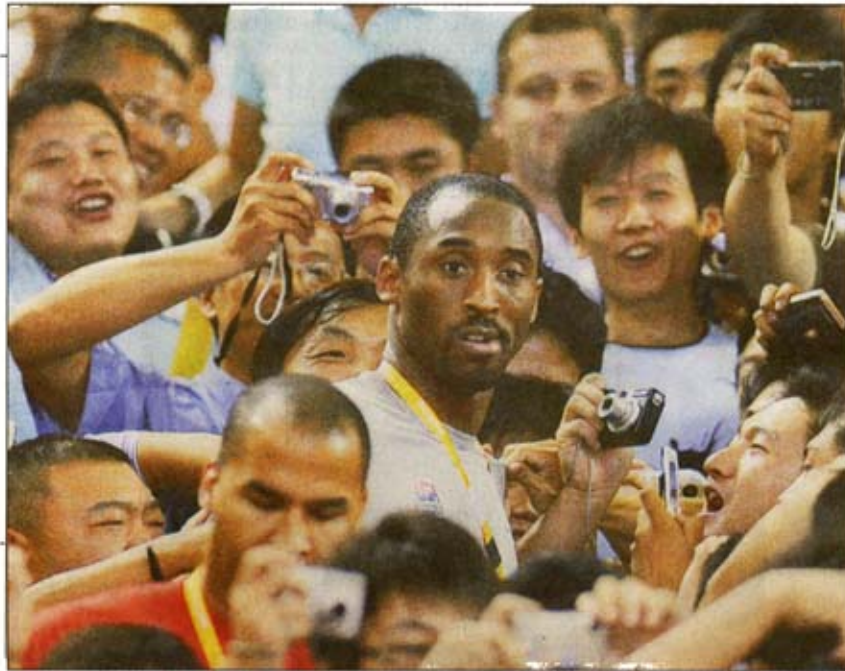


Thursday, August 21, 2008

THE NATION'S NEWSPAPER



## Among hoops-loving Chinese, it's a slam-dunk: **KOBE IS KING**



By Filippo Monteforte, AFP/Getty Images

**Mobbed wherever he goes:** Kobe Bryant is surrounded by Chinese supporters as he arrives to attend the U.S. women's preliminary basketball game against the Czech Republic at the Games.

By Kelly Whiteside  
USA TODAY

BEIJING — To understand Kobe Bryant's surreal popularity here, pick up a copy of one of the city's most widely read and respected newspapers, the *Beijing Youth Daily*. A glossy poster of Bryant in his U.S. Olympic jersey was wrapped around the outside of the newspaper Wednesday. The headline, translated, reads: "Kobe: Nobody can compare."

The occasion? A men's basketball quarterfinal game against Australia. The tribute was published even before Bryant had his finest performance of the Beijing Games with a game-high 25 points in a 116-85 victory Wednesday night.

If the USA gets past Argentina, the 2004 Olympic champion, in Friday's semifinals and advances

### **Kobe in Europe?**

■ Bryant among NBA stars who say they would jump for the right price, 14C

### **Cover story**

to Sunday's gold medal game, who knows how the Chinese might coronate their favorite American athlete.

This is the land of 1.3 billion Kobe fans, or so it seems. "To be honest with you, I don't know how to explain it," Bryant says of the adoration he's received.

"It's a phenomenon that's taken on a life of its own," NBA Commissioner David Stern adds.

Bryant might be the NBA's reigning MVP and widely regarded as the best player in the world, but stateside, outside of Los Angeles where he plays for the Lakers, he is a polarizing figure.

In China, however, he has been embraced unlike any other athlete in the world.

See COVER STORY next page ►

# Years of traveling to China planted seeds to his popularity there

Continued from 1A

Yao Di, a 22-year-old college student from Beijing, wore her Kobe shirt into the game Wednesday at Wukesong Olympic Basketball Gymnasium and explained her affection for No. 10 (Bryant's Team USA jersey).

"At first my boyfriend loves Kobe, then I love him more than my boyfriend," Yao said. "He is so strong, charming and aggressive."

## Cover story

"Most important is his faultless performance on the basketball court." Bryant's popularity has risen along with the growth of the game. There are 300 million basketball players in the country, according to the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA). The government, with help from the NBA, plans to install 800,000 baskets and backboards in villages throughout China, Stern said.

## NBA a Chinese favorite

NBA games have been televised in China for the last 20 years, but now the league has 50 different TV deals throughout China, Stern said. On many occasions, NBA.com draws more hits in China than it does in the USA. Two NBA teams will play two exhibition games in China in October, and the league is in ongoing talks with the CBA involving a future NBA-affiliated league.

The NBA also will manage the Olympic basketball arena once the Games end. ("It's the first NBA-ready arena in China," Stern says.) The NBA also hopes to be involved with the construction of 10 to 12 similar arenas throughout China.

As the NBA game has attracted more attention, so has Bryant. He has traveled extensively throughout China, making five lengthy trips during the last several years, mostly for grassroots clinics organized by Nike, his shoe sponsor.

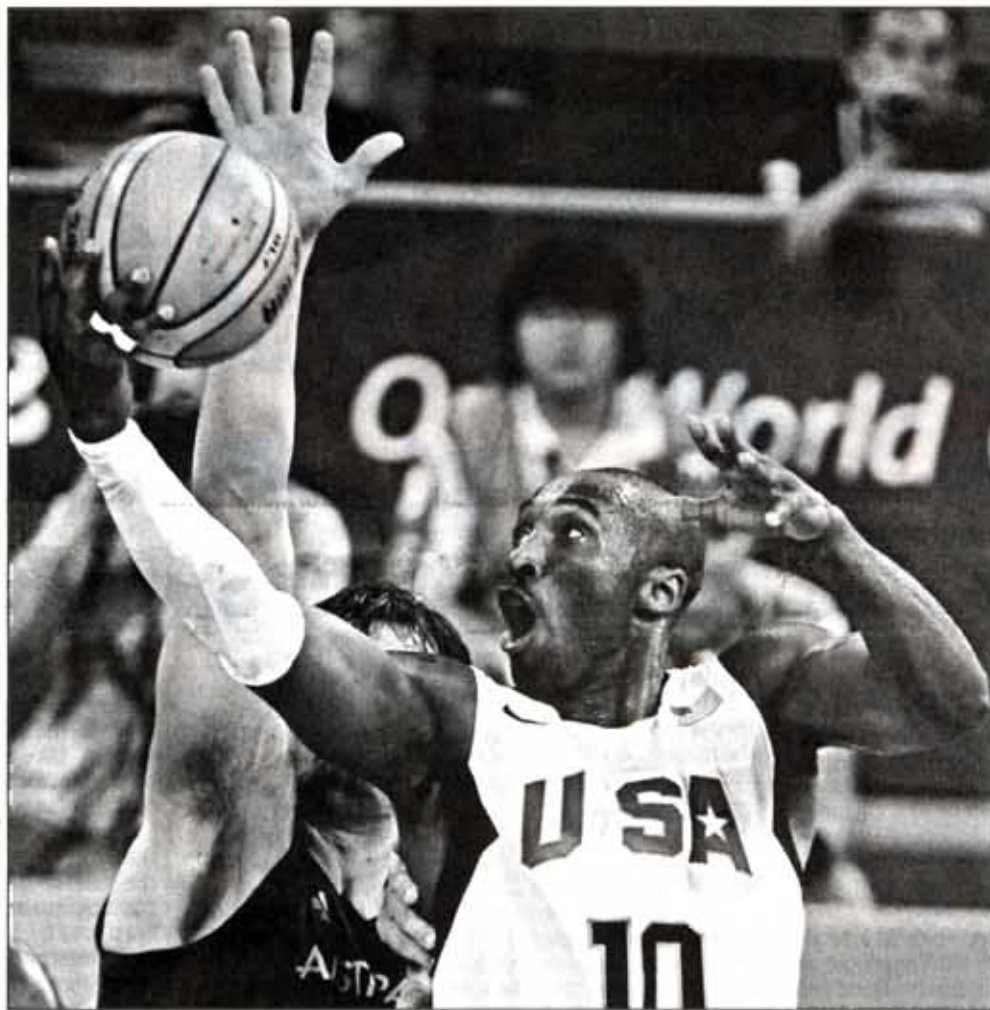
Earlier this year, Nike China launched a Bryant reality TV show called *Kobe Mentu* or "Kobe's Disciples." Finalists chosen from hundreds of applicants in China were selected and traveled to the USA to become "Kobe Disciples." Their experience learning about basketball from Bryant became a six-episode documentary.

"I guess what I'd say is he's invested," U.S. coach Mike Krzyzewski says. "What Kobe has given China before this (the Olympics) is a sign of respect. As if saying, 'You're good enough, so I'm going to keep coming here.' He has showed them respect over the last few years, and it's been reciprocated at a very high level. It's unbelievable, really."

During the opening ceremony, when Bryant's image flashed across the video screen, the stadium erupted. The only athlete who received a louder ovation was Chinese basketball star Yao Ming.

## Kobe's jersey outsells Yao's

For the second consecutive season, Bryant's Lakers jersey was the top-selling NBA jersey in China; Yao's Houston Rockets jersey ranked 10th. In the USA, Bryant ranks No. 2 behind the Boston Celtics' Kevin Garnett.



By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

**Going to the rack:** Bryant scores past Australia's Andrew Bogut in a 25-point performance Wednesday against Australia. The same day, a top Chinese magazine offered a poster featuring the Lakers star.



By Jason Reed, Reuters

**Into it:** Bryant is the "first fan" among athletes representing the USA. He's been seen at venues for several sports. Here he watches swimming with, from left, Carlos Boozer, Chris Paul and LeBron James.

"I love Yao Ming and Kobe, but I love Kobe more," says Yang Huijuan, a 29-year-old nurse from Shijiazhuang, Hebei province, who was at Wednesday's game. "I began to know Kobe when I saw the games of Yao Ming."

During U.S. games, Bryant receives the most boisterous reception by far. In an earlier game

against Spain, a blowout U.S. victory in which Bryant spent a good portion on the bench in foul trouble, the crowd starting chanting "Ko-be, Ko-be" with 1:24 left in the game for seemingly no reason. They only relented after Bryant acknowledged them. "I threw them a little princess wave," he said, cupping

It doesn't matter to Chinese fans that Bryant hasn't always been the best player on the court in his first Olympics. Given the talent surrounding him, the USA doesn't need Bryant to be the team's leading scorer. In fact, he's third in scoring (14.7 average).

After struggling with his outside shot at the start, going 1-for-17 from three-point range in his first three games, he has hit 11 of 19 in the last three games. He's also been the team's best defensive stopper, routinely guarding the opponent's top player.

Off the court, he has been the team's multilingual ambassador — he is fluent in Italian and speaks Spanish well — skills that spread goodwill in the global village of the Olympics. Unlike 2004, when that team sulked its way to a bronze medal, the Redeem Team has been gracious outside the arena and dominant inside it, beating opponents by an average of 32 points.

For Bryant, it's another step in his image rehabilitation. Five years ago, when he faced rape charges in Colorado that were eventually dropped, he lost some major endorsement deals.

Since then, he has rebounded, becoming one of the NBA's top pitchers.

Though there are some lingering negative feelings toward Bryant among U.S. fans, in China that's not the case. "This is a totally different world over here," teammate Carmelo Anthony says. "We're not back in the U.S. right now. We're in China. He can leave that back in the U.S."

Home-team loyalty is another reason why Bryant isn't beloved throughout 50 states.

"It's fragmented at home," Krzyzewski says. "You're still a Laker, and nationally there's always someone who wants you to lose badly in the NBA, 29 cities probably. ... Respect equals boo there. Here respect equals cheer."

Here in Beijing, Bryant has

been Team USA's "first fan," a regular at U.S. women's hoops games and other events as well.

"I'm just a sports junkie, so for me to hop around from event to event and see so many great teams, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Bryant says. He and several teammates attended several of Michael Phelps' races. ("Absolutely sensational," Bryant says of Phelps feat.)

He has also showed up at beach volleyball and watched Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh beat Brazil on Tuesday. ("It wasn't fair. It was like taking candy from a baby. They demolished those poor girls. They haven't lost in like two years; now that's a Dream Team.")

## Soccer is his second love

Then there's his love for soccer. Three minutes after his team beat Germany on Monday, he asked a news reporter, "Who won the Brazil-Germany game?" As in women's soccer. When he was told that Brazil won, he pumped his fist and said, "Yesss!"

The next day when asked why he loved the Brazilian style of play, he launched into a lengthy appreciation for Brazil's best women's player. ("Marta is my favorite female athlete to watch. She's just so electrifying and entertaining. She plays with a lot of energy and a lot of imagination and creativity.") Then he opined on the U.S. women's soccer team, and on it went.

Tuesday night he attended the men's soccer semifinal between Argentina and Brazil. Elsewhere in the world, there would be no bigger draw than Messi and Ronaldo. The locals, however, went crazy when they spotted Bryant in the crowd.

Soccer might be the most popular sport in the world, but here, in this booming hoops nation, nobody can compare.

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