A 6'6" Guard from Lower Merion High School . . .

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The world has only begun to reverse the downward spiral into which it plummeted, in the weeks following Kobe Bryant's death. That his induction into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in May just happen to coincide with a returning to some sense of normalcy amidst this pandemic plagued world is an interesting coincidence. January 26, 2020, the day of Kobe's passing is indelibly etched in the memories of many. Every generation has moments like this. For those who were of age in the 1960s, it was the assassinations of JFK, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. For those who grew up in the 1970s, it was the airplane crash that took the life of Pittsburgh Pirate outfielder and Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente, and for those who grew up in the 1980s it was the death of Len Bias, the University of Maryland's star forward. As I wrote last year, I was awakened from an afternoon nap and told of the helicopter crash that killed Kobe, his daughter and six other people. My thoughts immediately went to his wife, Vanessa, and their other children, then to the players whose public admiration for Kobe is well-documented—guys like Kyrie Irving who brazenly and naively challenged Kobe to a game of one-on-one early in his career, Carmelo Anthony, LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, Chris Paul and numerous others, and finally to his parents, particularly Joe “Jelly Bean” Bryant, whom I watched play as a young teen.

Kobe was the NBA's second greatest 2 guard ever, behind, of course, Michael Jordan. On that point, there is no debate. No, Kobe, was not a better player than Jordan. He was not a better shooter, scorer, passer, rebounder, or defender than Jordan. And for these reasons, people like ESPN's Skip Bayless and Stephen A. Smith refuse to entertain any notion that Kobe was Jordan's equal, but they admit that of all the players who were dubbed the next Jordan he came the closest. Indeed, Jordan and Kobe are inextricably linked in ways that most people didn't realize until the premiere of *the Last Dance* and Jordan's tearful speech at Kobe's memorial service last year. Michael even referred to Kobe affectionately as his “little brother” that

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he tried to help as much as he could. Still, there are a few areas in which Kobe was superior to Jordan. Few players in NBA history were as beloved by his contemporaries as Kobe. Despite the ferocity that Kobe brought to the court and his unrelenting drive to win, even if that meant annihilating his opponent, many players genuinely liked Kobe, both his peers as well as those who came into the league years after he had established himself as an all-time great. Some of them benefitted from his advice while others were fortunate to have been on the receiving end of his mentorship. Second, Kobe was the most difficult shot-maker ever with just a few ticks left on the clock. Off-balance, drifting sideways, falling backwards, tripping, behind the backboard, fading away—you name it, Kobe made it. Third, Kobe was easily a much better long-range shooter than Jordan.

By the end of Kobe's tenth year in the league, he had reached iconic status. In January of 2006, he scored 81 points in a single game, against the Toronto Raptors, the most points ever by a guard and the second most in NBA history behind Wilt Chamberlain's 100 points, more than forty years earlier. Kobe was a cultural icon. Even among the greatest players of all time in any sport, few have ever reached iconic status. We can think of only a handful of individuals in American sports who would be considered icons¹, five of whom have played in the NBA—Dr. J., Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, and the biggest sports icon of them all, Muhammad Ali. No attempt to operationalize the word icon will be offered here, that is an exercise for another day. Although I'm not sure we could, even if we tried, what we can say is that while the word icon may be difficult to define, we know it when we see it.

Icons are rarely identified by their full names. Instead they are called by their nicknames or their first names or their last names. They are beloved the world over. They transcend their particular sport. They are household names, even among the members of the household who know little to nothing about the sport in which the icon plays.

When Kobe died the world mourned. Murals of Kobe not only sprouted up all over LA, but across the country and throughout the world. Perhaps the most famous is a larger-than-life mural of Kobe embracing Gianna on a basketball court in the middle of a housing complex in the Philippines. Rappers have honored him in song, none better than the one Snoop Dogg penned later that summer. Athletes in other sports donned numbers 8 and 24 in tribute to Kobe. Sports shows devoted segments to him, some entire episodes to him. Basketball teams paid homage to him by accepting 8 second backcourt violations at the start of games.

During his twenty-year run with the Los Angeles Lakers, he brought a level of excitement to Los Angeles that had been missing since the showtime Lakers of the 1980s. He played an instrumental part in helping the Lakers win five championships. In the process, he brought smiles to many faces and a lot of enjoyment to Lakers' fans specifically, and basketball fans, generally. Kobe retired in 2016, in his final virtuoso, he played that game as if it was his last—because it was—he scored 60 points

¹ Other American icons include Jackie Robinson, Serena Williams, Tiger Woods, Florence Griffith Joyner, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens.

against the Jazz. While the performance was not the most efficient, it was exhilarating. The Staples Center was electric, the energy was palpable, and fans were beaming. The Lakers won a come from behind victory, thanks in large part to Kobe's scoring outburst.

In retirement Kobe, was becoming just as successful in his second career as he was in his first. He apparently loved telling stories. Aside from winning an Oscar, he was becoming the most public male advocate for women's basketball in the world. He was coaching his daughter, Gianna's, team. Many saw the basketball greatness in him also emerging in her.

Like all of us, Kobe was far from perfect, as several of the writers in this volume point out in bold relief, yet despite the err of his ways, scores of young people found him to be their perfect role model. Unlike most of us, Kobe's mistakes were made public and his failings a spectacle. A lesser man may have wilted, but not Kobe. Instead he used his mistakes and peoples' reactions to his stumbles to create an alter-ego, thus the Black Mamba was born.

It is for these reasons and others that we believe Kobe warrants a special issue of the *Journal of African American Studies*.

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