Maintaining a Mamba Mentality

Preface

 Basketball is more than just a sport: it is also rhythmic poetry in motion. It is a widespread culture. A global phenomenon. It can be a lifestyle and a career. It is a brotherhood of hooping. NBA players spend their time either playing, practicing, partying, parenting, and living normal lives just like the rest of us, you know, minus the part where we are not being paid to play basketball for millions of dollars. Honestly, sometimes the NBA does not feel real. There are people who are over 7 feet tall who can dribble the ball like it is a yo-yo that comes quickly back to their hand. There is something oddly entertaining about watching giants get physical with one another in the paint and for rebounds as they battle for 48 minutes. Some players will attempt a shot from almost half court and make it look absolutely Stephortless while others will completely miss the backboard. I am one of those players who hits a car in the parking lot 50 ft away from the hoop. The physical capabilities and athleticism required to play in the NBA is almost superhuman. Plus, even some of the bench players in the NBA could give you the business at your local YMCA basketball game. Basketball was always a part of my life one way or another. As a kid, I spent my days playing soccer, 4 square, and tetherball; at that time basketball was not as appealing as the others. In my youth, I had always enjoyed watching basketball games rather than playing in them. Whatever Lakers’ games came on the T.V as my dad would put them on sometimes in between the telenovelas as the games were on in the evening. I cannot remember anything specifically from those games other than the name Kobe Bryant. Having now grown up, I have taken a bigger liking to basketball and it has become one of my passions since attending UCSB. Now that I am in my third year of college, I like to smile back and reflect on what basketball and what Kobe means to me and how it has gotten me through some hard times thus far.

 Kobe “Bean” Bryant is my childhood idol, so I had to find a way to pay homage to him after his untimely passing. In everything that I have done thus far in my 21 years on this floaty space rock, he has been my inspiration for how I want to approach my responsibilities. Kobe always took it upon himself to want to win every single game of basketball that he played, whether it was, practice, or game 7 of the NBA finals, he wanted that W. It meant everything to Kobe to put everything on the line no matter what the conditions were because that was the kind of person he was. There are crazy stories in the NBA about just how rigorous Kobe’s work ethic was when it came to basketball. For Kobe, succeeding in one area of his life was not enough. He invested some of the money he earned in the NBA to invest in his own companies, basketball programs, gaining more sponsorships, collaborations and such. He started writing books about his experiences as a father, player, and human in the NBA. For fun, he created an Emmy winning animated short film dedicated to his love of basketball. No matter how successful as a basketball player and businessman Kobe was, I think his greatest achievement was being a proud father. He embraced the term “girl dad” and made sure to love each and every single one of his daughters as winning in basketball was no longer his only goal in life. Kobe wanted to be great in every aspect of his being. It was almost as if he carried himself as a deity of basketball. He was brogadacious and arrogant but with his credentials and individual accolades who could fault him. The way Kobe demanded respect and gave the most confident answers in his interviews were spine chilling. Yet, he also knew how to have a good time and it was not all business for Kobe in the locker room, off the court, or in the media. His personality was like none other and I think it is because of the way he approached everything without fear or regret in his life. Kobe became my idol because he stood for more than himself, despite how great he was, and knowing it, he always knew that if he pushed himself more, there would be nothing he could not accomplish and one there to stop him.

 To me, Kobe symbolized the tenacity and the unstoppable force which the human mind and body are capable of. It was borderline crazy to see how much dedication and detail Kobe put into mastering his art of basketball. Kobe’s nickname in the NBA was the “Black Mamba” as he would strike fear into the enemy teams due to his overwhelming competitive spirit and nature to win. For example, Kobe scored 81 points in a single NBA game in which the Lakers were losing or trailing in score for three whole quarters. Kobe’s competitive mindset drove him to want to reach greater heights even after facing whatever challenge was in his way. “The Mamba Mentality”, a term he coined, encapsulates how much work and sacrifice is required to achieve a desired result or accomplish a goal highlighting the gradual steps and process along the way. Obsession and ambition are two words that describe some of the necessary requirements in order to pursue the endless battle with yourself and what you define as greatness.

 “A lot of people say they want to be great, but they’re not willing to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve greatness.”

― **Kobe Bryant,** [**The Mamba Mentality: How I Play**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/62484356)

Greatness comes at a price, it requires an individual to expend their effort and energy in order to accomplish something that is worth celebrating, not just by them, but will be recognized by others. My definition of greatness and success can be defined from the ability to break barriers and go against every obstacle that is stacked against you. The Mamba Mentality embraces tackling challenges but allowing yourself to accept failure and realizing that more work needs to be done. Hard work will be inadvertently awarded with more hard work until you feel there is absolutely nothing left to be done. True satisfaction can only come when the end result has been gained but stumbling along the way is just as important as the final outcome. In my studies and in my life, like most, I have faced walls and circumstances which seemed overbearing and unbreakable. Coming into college I expected myself to barely manage staying afloat in my classes, chanting “C’s Get Degrees”, as I struggled to submit the final assignments my senior year of highschool. As a first generation student, I had no idea what to expect from higher education, only that I knew I had to succeed. There was a huge sense of culture shock initially that felt overwhelming being in a whole new city away from my family and friends. I was worried about if I even chose the right major or how I was going to do in my classes. However, failure was never an option and it could never be. I knew that I had to hold myself to a higher standard than I did before which was easier said than done. I know I have to succeed for the sake of my future, but also for the hopes and wishes of my family and those who have supported my aspirations. I know I have to push my own boundaries and get out of my own comfort zone, to avoid complacency, in order to achieve my own form of greater success.

Applying to college applications, filling out FAFSA forms, even moving into the college dorm was a stressful process, and that was just the start of it. Figuring out how to navigate online portals and reteaching myself good study habits took more than I expected.Towards the end of my 1st year tenure at UCSB, the Covid-19 pandemic had reached global levels and the United States was entering a version of quarantine lockdown. Classes were now strictly being taught remotely, I was forced to move back into my small yet humble mobile home, and I was now leaving a place where it felt like I could be myself. I, like other college students, know the different challenges and pressures we face from the outside world but also the pressures that we place on ourselves internally to want to do well. We can not help but compare ourselves to our peers and can sometimes question whether or not we are doing enough. It feels like a part of growing up is feeling yourself being stretched so thin that we forget to enjoy the experiences life and college have to offer. I too have to remind myself, to pat myself on the back for acknowledging the little victories I have been able to amass along the way.

My goal with the Gaucho Survival Guide to Covid-19 and this narrative was to highlight the mental fortitude and way of thinking that makes UCSB students so successful. From my interviews and research, I can firmly confirm that other UCSB students represent the Mamba Mentality even if they are unaware they are doing so. Basketball has helped me in my academic studies as it has been a means of self care for me to rely on when I feel myself succumbing to pressure. I personally know I apply the Mamba Mentality to other aspects of my life other than basketball as well. For example, when it comes to being an older brother, a better friend, or as a more open-minded student. I pride myself on how much effort I am able to put into my studies because I know it is for my personal success but also for the aspirations of my family. That is an added responsibility, but it is a very rewarding one. Students who I interviewed had dreams of traveling the world and being able to pay back all those who have helped support them. They had particular challenges that they had faced but were also able to overcome them as well. In light of a pandemic, where there are more restrictions and limitations, it can feel like the world is crumbling and even more suffocating. When you take in the fact that you are away from your family and support systems while at college, studying becomes a harder challenge when you feel isolated. When you have to juggle mental health, a social life, responsibilities, your personal desires, school sometimes takes a back seat. Deadlines can seem terrifying and overwhelming when you have issues other than school to worry about as well.

I have stumbled and fell on my face both literally and figuratively while attending UCSB. In this narrative piece I wanted to showcase that no matter what the issue is, you are allowed to feel what you feel. Highlighting the relatability within different struggles that students face demonstrates compassion for their traumatic or painful struggles while also showcasing the outstanding resilience of that individual as they have put that event behind them. Tears, breakdowns, breakups, scars, trauma, therapy sessions, all resemble the complicated learning process in which it takes to succeed and demonstrates how success is not linear. Smiles, memories, diplomas, and even completed RAAB projects, all serve to highlight the end goal of the Mamba Mentality which is, despite all hardship you face, there is nothing stopping you from achieving what you want to truly accomplish.

Maintaining a Mamba Mentality

January 25th, 2020

It was the night all the news media and shows were talking about how Lebron James was going to pass Kobe Bryant for third on the all time scoring list in the NBA record books. This was the media craze because Lebron had recently been traded to the Los Angeles Lakers and not a few years before, Kobe Bryant had retired after spending his entire 20 season career with the Lakers. For those who do not have time to sit around and watch a ball go into a net for four 12 minute quarters with added time, then you are in luck, I will explain why the moment was special. Both players entered the league following their senior year of highschool at the age of 18 and have been able to cement their legacy since then. Kobe has won 5 championship titles all with the Lakers while Lebron James has led multiple teams to a championship banner as well. Lebron and Kobe were considered some of the best two-way players in their prime, meaning they could guard the opposing best player while still scoring about 25-30 points that night. Between the two legends, 5 M.V.P. trophies, they have 9 championship rings and banners, 36x all star team selections, 24 all-nba selections, and 14 all nba defensive first team. These are some of the highest individual achievements any player could get, but these two superstars had double digits of almost each. Any basketball fan could recognize the praise these two players should receive for accomplishing what they have in their respective careers. You have to give them their flowers for how they have inspired future generations and had a global impact that is more than just basketball.

 Lebron is an all time great player who can score, assist, rebound, and destroy your favorite teams with his unstoppable set of moves even at the age of 35+. Kobe’s prowess on the basketball court embodied what he called the “Mamba Mentality” which meant giving it all you possibly could, and then more, in terms of effort. This could be applied to scoring buckets but also just to anything you wanted to achieve in life. The Mamba Mentality is about determination and having the resolve to put in the work necessary to accomplish whatever goal you put your mind to. As redundant as it sounds. That is exactly what Kobe was going for. Whether it was practicing the same shot 1000 times, he wanted to make perfection his second nature. Kobe was driven to win no matter the cost. Even if it meant putting his body on the line, taking matters into his own hands, or trusting his teammates to make the right play, Kobe was willing to do it all to win. So for Lebron to pass him up in the record books, this was like a monumental passing of the torch moment. It was the end of decade and a generation of basketball players with Kobe being one of the last few to trickle out.

January 26th, 2020

The next morning felt eerily strange, there was a slight bit of overcast and everybody from the friend group, including my roommate, got up late that day for brunch. All of the guys we knew were from 5th Floor FT North Tower and we met them the first couple of weeks at school. Beggars could not be choosers since everybody at FT were stuck with each other since we were almost 2 miles off of campus. We ran into a group of guys who were suitemates with each other and we hit it off almost instantly. We decided to play Mafia and other kinds of party games the first weeks of school so we got to know some of the people on the floor better. We met Clement, Zach, Max, and eventually Ralph just by socializing and seeing each other at the dining commons then we formed the Jarkata group. Nathan and I got lucky and scored some life long friends despite being kind of introverted at first. The dining commons became a routine thing and we usually ate brunch on the weekends together. It was cute and wholesome to watch a bunch of dudes gather around a small table and courteously wait for another. I would have my waffles and the guys would serve themselves endless bowls of cereals. I always drowned my UCSB logo waffles with butter and honey. Cinnamon toast crunch was their favorite cereal by far. Max would usually have his mocha coffee mix and would always be the last to finish too. This day in particular I remember seeing the brunch menu and thinking I was better off having a bowl of cereal too. Nothing really seemed that appetizing that day, not even the cake dessert special which we were sitting right next to. Everyone was chatting around the table taking turns talking about who the better player was, whether it was Kobe or Lebron. There was some nice banter among us basketball lads until suddenly Clement told us that there had been some shocking news on his Twitter feed. The TMZ headline read that NBA Legend Kobe Bryant had died in a helicopter crash which had been reported that morning. You would have to be crazy enough to believe that a story like this could be released considering the events of the night before. To us, it clearly seemed fictional and an attempt to capitalize for extra views through clickbaiting. The more and more Clement read the article, none of the guys wanted to accept the fact that it was real. He always read things in a monotone voice, it was his speciality to be sarcastically snarky. Clement loves to think we are all gullible and fall for the easiest tricks, yet nobody was laughing or trying to call his bluff this time. We all went to check our phones and look for more articles or any information we could find about the event. The conversations stopped as we were all frantically searching to see if Clement was lying or not. After a few minutes of collective research, we found nothing else related but we stayed on top of the story for the rest of the day. We bussed our plates and went back to business as usual, we headed back up to North Tower 5th floor but I tried to stay glued to my phone for the rest of the day.

In my head, I kept thinking about if a helicopter crash was an actual or plausible way for Kobe to die. I knew Kobe preferred to use a helicopter as a method of transport because he lived in Los Angeles and due to the traffic, it was a gajillion times faster than a car. To me, it seemed unnatural for that to have been the cause of his death. So I already decided that the story had been fake from the start. As more and more information came throughout the day. The situation continued to feel more and more surreal. There were more articles repeating the same details from the original story leaked by TMZ but the detail they did add made my stomach turn. At first it was only reported that the helicopter had crashed and there had been casualties but no specifics. It was later confirmed that Bryant was going to his daughter, Gianna’s, basketball game that day to coach the girls' team. There had been a coach who taught at Orange Coast College, which is a school I know from my hometown, who was in attendance for his daughter who was also on the team that Bryant coached. There had been other families aboard the helicopter along with the pilot. It was said that even the 7 other passengers had died in the crash. I continued to be in a state of complete denial. I REFUSED to believe that Kobe and all those other families could die on what felt like such an ordinary day.

Imagining that my childhood idol would go up in flames to a fiery crash, holding his own daughter in his arms, screaming or praying that they live through such a devastating event, it broke my heart. Not just my heart. It broke me. I ended up crying for the rest of the day once the story was officially confirmed. It was overwhelming. Being in my second quarter of university, we were already approaching midterm season again. I knew I still had tons of assignments and coursework to get done that day but I could not stop the flood gates nor did I want to. Thankfully my roommate gave me the room so I could have the space to cry my heart out. There were walls that were punched, pillows that were screamed and cried into, and most importantly deep breathes that were taken. I texted everybody in the basketball chat and some of my close friends that I was completely going through it. I am typically the kind of person who is reserved when it comes to their emotions and even then it is hard for me to want to communicate them to others effectively. It was uncharacteristic of me to reach out for help but I knew I was not going to be able to get through this on my own. That is when I knew I was going to be in for a long day. Every time I opened up my phone to social media it was a picture or an old highlight showing Kobe and the fact that he had passed away. I had a poster of Kobe hanging right above my desk and it felt like he had just kicked my dog or stolen my favorite piece of chocolate from me. I could not stand to look at Kobe without being driven to tears. I was completely thrown off by how I had been affected by this tragedy because my emotions felt so out of control. Keeping my composure that day was hard enough because I felt so vulnerable and disheartened. The only other time I felt this completely miserable was when I got broken up with in highschool and my dad found me crying on the kitchen floor at 2.A.M. I was talking to one of my best friends on the phone right before I broke down into tears and my parents found me. At the ripe age of 15, there was a little language barrier between me and my parents so it was hard for me to try and understand where they were coming from. What I did understand in between my uncontrollable sobbing was that my dad essentially told me to “Why are you crying as a man? Stop crying over a dumb woman, you got more important things to worry about than ladies”. Coming from a traditional Hispanic household, idealized machismo seeks to represent that unyielding will to never give up but also to never show emotions while doing so. Stoicism portrays that untouchable heroic persona while crying is given connotations of being weak and feminine. Crying is usually the only real way I am able to physically express myself to show how much I care about an issue or situation. To have my emotions feel invalidated, especially by my parents, completely sucked. I have done my best to disconnect my emotions from how I present myself, yet I knew I was doing myself a disservice. The day Kobe died, I knew that it was pointless trying to prevent my emotions from getting the best of me. Crying that day became more and more cathartic as I was becoming more aware of the issues and traumas I had to work on. I did absolutely no work that day and spent the entire day mourning the loss of my childhood hero.

January 27th, 2020

I knew I had to get my responsibilities done, I knew my roommate wanted to take a nap but I was busy crying, and I knew that I had to drag myself out of bed to get a meal that day too. It all felt impossible and unimportant. Every other care in the world did not matter to me unless it was talking about Kobe. In the following days, there had been memorials and shrines created around the world, highlighting just how much of an impact one man could have. Kobe was being praised and memorialized in different languages and countries which helped to show me I was not alone in feeling like this. Back in my hometown, we have a water tower that has become a local landmark to the Santa Ana community, which was covered in purple and gold to commemorate the life of Kobe Bryant. UCSB’S own Henley Gate was proudly representing the Lakers colors that day too. I saw on online forums that the students at UCSB were going to have a community vigil for Kobe and I knew I had to attend. The vigil was to be held at UCSB and was going to take place at Storke Tower at around 8 pm. They also held an official NBA memorial at the Staples Center where they live streamed the event as well and had NBA legends speak about who Kobe was as a person, father, and player. It felt like the whole world was grieving the loss of Kobe and to me it was bittersweet.

Crying is the one thing that I do the most that I absolutely hate. Yet, it was the only thing I could do. It was good for me to have spent the whole day crying, not only because it felt relieving, but also because I ran out of tears by the time it was time for the vigil to start. I think I was able to complete one reading assignment that day. I tried my best to get my responsibilities done but it was hard enough to keep my mind preoccupied without wanting to break down. I spent the rest of the day hanging out with Ralph and Clement who were also big Kobe fans, without them, I do not think I would have made it through the day. Ralph gifted me one of his old Kobe shirts and even though it reeked of Ralph body odor, I wholeheartedly appreciate the kind gesture. I know Clement and I spent a lot of time talking about our favorite plays that Kobe did and some of our favorite games that he played in. We listened to some music and were just able to enjoy one another’s company despite us grieving so hard the day before. I think Clement was a bigger Kobe fan than I was and he was handling the situation a lot better than I was. I knew I had to stay strong, not just for myself, but also for my friends who felt similar to me. I just knew I had to convince them to come with me to the vigil. It took a decent amount of convincing and guilt tripping but eventually Clement and Ralph agreed to go with me.

When we arrived at Storke Tower, we got there about 10 minutes early. There were not many people there, they were still setting up the microphone and sounds, but people were slowly pouring in. If I remember correctly there were a sizable amount of people in attendance towards the end, almost 150+. The sky was a nice dark night, the air was cold and crispy, and campus seemed so peaceful that it felt like those in attendance at the vigil were the only ones there. The host of the event gave a brief introduction as to why he decided to hold it. He was a 4th year chemistry major and that was all I could remember about him. I do remember his speech about never getting to meet Kobe and yet he was there planning an event and crying his heart out. He encouraged others to speak about what they were feeling, what they wanted to say to Kobe, or maybe just something that honored his memory. After the host was done, the mic was left to the crowd and there were a couple of guys who went before me. I think I was the second or third to go. Public speaking always made me nervous but it felt like I had an obligation to speak at this event. I felt absolutely compelled by some natural force to want to take up that mic. My friends jokes around saying that I should do it, but I knew deep down that I absolutely wanted to, and I did after the teasing.

I was wearing the Kobe shirt Ralph gave me and as I started to make my way towards the microphone, I could feel myself almost bursting to tears. In my head I told myself “Get it together! You are the one who walked up here Bozo, so now it is time to shine”. It was pretty much like giving a powerpoint presentation without the slides or the practice necessary to give an adequate presentation. I trusted myself to get my message across despite the fact that my mind was completely boggled by a melancholic feeling since the tragedy.

 I did not know where to begin so I started off with an introduction of how I even got into basketball and how playing with the Jakarta guys grew that passion more. I stated that I obviously was not the best player on the team but the fact that I enjoyed myself to the fullest and found pleasure in playing basketball was enough solace for me. I went into how we all loved to casually just shoot around with one another and how it has strengthened our friendship and trust with one another. The intensity is always there when we play but it is always good and free spirited competition as well. I loved the fact that basketball brought us together and I wanted to highlight the fact that it was Kobe that brought us together that night too. I mentioned my Kobe poster and how I struggled to look at it these past couple of days but seeing all these people gathered in his name was something that I could not miss to see. To see so many students I had never met or talked to before, show me compassion and cheer me on as I spoke, it almost gave me Herculean strength. I gave my condolences to all those who were affected and I concluded with the fact that Kobe was able to touch all of our lives in one way or another and I was proud to be sharing a moment/mindset like that with everyone in attendance. My final thoughts were that I was still stunned by the news and I did not know when I would feel ok again. I thought I would never be ok again because it was my dream to meet Kobe Bryant. I wanted to watch him live before he retired but I could never afford to go see him. I wanted to be able to at least meet him and shake his hand at maybe a charity event or walking around L.A but I was never lucky. Since his passing, I realized that I was robbed of any opportunity to ever get that option and I think that is what hurt me the most. A man that I had never got to meet in my life, left such a large impact on me and I had not even realized it. Once I finished, other students started paying their respects as well and we all had an embrace with one another before disbanding.

The vigil was an important night to me as it showed me that I was able to get through some personal challenging times in my academic career. It provided me with a whole different outlook on the way I conduct myself at school, in my work, and as a person. It made me realize that I wanted to express myself whenever I possibly could, especially if it was for the sake of sympathizing with somebody else’s struggles. I learned that even though I was going through a hard time, I should have been better and put more effort into working, so I could give myself sufficient time to mourn and move forward. I also learned that despite how insignificant something can feel, the ripple effects of it can be monumental. I can appreciate the fact that basketball has become more of an emotional outlet for me and that it provides others comfort as well. Challenges and facing the reality of life may suck, but if there is anything that I learned from being a Kobe fan, it is that it does not matter how many times you fall so long as you maintain your determination to succeed. What really matters is how many times you are able to get back up, and take another shot, without thinking twice about it.