The Associated Press

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — Kobe Bryant has missed the last week of practice with an injury. His teammates still don't know their new offense. And the Los Angeles Lakers just finished the first winless preseason in franchise history.
Ready or not — and most signs point to not — the Lakers' regular season has arrived.

Bryant sat out Monday while his teammates went through a lengthy workout ahead of tonight's opener against Dallas. It's the first of four games in six days for a star-studded club with championship aspirations, but plenty of work ahead.
"I think all of us are ready (for) the popcorn and the lights to come on tomorrow," said Dwight Howard, who played in just two preseason games while returning deliberately from back surgery. "It's not going to come overnight. We all understand that. We just have to stay patient through the whole process. We have to keep working, and we'll be fine."
Bryant might not be fine for a bit longer. The fifth-leading scorer in NBA history is resting his right foot, which was bruised and strained last week, and the Lakers won't decide whether he'll play against the Mavericks until game time.
He showed up at the Lakers' training complex Monday for treatment and practice, yelling at his teammates from the sideline while Jodie Meeks ran with the Los Angeles' starters.
"We've got to worry about that when it comes, but I can see him playing tomorrow, definitely," Metta World Peace said of Bryant. "When Kobe is hurt, whether it's the preseason or the playoffs, he plays. ... Kobe has never been afraid to be hurt and play. I think his mind is different from other people."
Indeed, Bryant has played through all manner of injuries in his career, particularly in the past few seasons, so his absence from practice concerns coach Mike Brown. Bryant's leadership and court sense is particularly valuable while the Lakers integrate two new starters and a revamped bench into a new offense, but Kobe hasn't been available for significant stretches of camp.
"If there is one guy that's capable of sitting out and then playing in a game, it's Kobe," Brown said. "There's concern there, because you want him to be healthy, but that's why we're a team. He has bounced back from a lot of stuff. You know it had to be serious if he's been out this long."
At least Brown had good news on other injuries Monday: Howard is good to go for the Lakers' season-opening back-to-back games and beyond, with no limitations on his minutes, while backup big man Jordan Hill also is expected to play after taking the day off from practice.
While his players heal, the coach is still waiting for his club to grasp the intricacies of its new Princeton-inflected offense. Brown deliberately installed the new schemes slowly, but the absences of Howard and Bryant from several preseason games set back the team's development.
"It obviously gets in the way of our growth when we don't have a full lineup, especially two key guys," said Steve Nash, who played sparingly in his first preseason with Los Angeles. "I think in the long run, we'll get plenty of time. It's just a matter of how quickly we can get some chemistry

and some success."

But the losses couldn't have helped the Lakers' confidence in that offense, either. Los Angeles went 0-8 for the first time, blowing late leads and getting blown out with equal ineptitude.

Brown doesn't believe the preseason reveals anything about his starting lineup's progress or the depth of a bench that hasn't played well at all in October, and he sees the offense as the biggest problem for his defense so far. With more turnovers resulting from poor execution of the offense, Los Angeles' theoretically sturdy defense in front of the dominant Howard has been giving up transition points in bunches.

Yet even amid all of the losses and injuries, the Lakers know they've got the chance for a remarkable season. They've largely avoided commenting on Oklahoma City's trade of James Harden to Houston, ostensibly weakening the defending Western Conference champions and opening the door for Los Angeles a bit wider.

Until the Lakers get a few wins in their own column, they won't be thinking about other teams' losses.

"I see it, I feel it, and I know it's going to be great for us later on," Pau Gasol said. "We just have to stay with it and be persistent."__PUBLIC__