

# SHAQUILLE O'NEAL

## The Original Big Baller

In case you've missed *SportsCenter* for the past 15 years, there's only one thing you need to know about Shaquille O'Neal: The guy is, well, kind of a big deal. At 7-foot-1 and 325 pounds, he stays leaving his size 23 footprint on the game. Since tipping off his career with the Orlando Magic in 1992, the 14-time All-Star and 2000 MVP has won four NBA championships. Off the court, he's been just as big, with one platinum rap album and one gold, a handful of box-office winners, and stints as a celebrity spokesman for everything from Icy Hot to Chinese sneaker company Li-Ning. This upcoming season, Shaq, 36, will rejoin the Phoenix Suns, who acquired him in a trade with the Miami Heat in February. And he's still rapping today—right, Kobe? But there's more than backboard-bending dunks and braggadocio to Shaq: His gregarious personality redefined NBA big men. Just one day after making an appearance at the Belmont Stakes in Long Island, N.Y., The Big Diesel stopped through the Big Apple to dissect his living legacy.

**VIBE:** *What makes Shaq original?*

**Shaquille O'Neal:** The realness. I'm a guy from the middle of New Jersey who doesn't forget where he comes from. When people look at me, they see a little bit of themselves. There's a lot of guys who get to my level and sit down in offices with lawyers who put on suits and say, 'You should do this, you should do that.' Every commercial with me, I designed it. Every contract, I did it myself. I've always done it my way.

*Is that how you segued into rap so easily at the beginning of your NBA career?*

I started off break dancing, DJing, and rhyming in elementary school before I started playing basketball. As a matter of fact, I messed my knee up break dancing and had to stop and just play ball. But I was out there in Newark and Jersey City with my little radio around the time [Afrika Bambaataa & the Soul Sonic Force's] "Planet Rock" came out. I even used to DJ at Louisiana State University to make a few extra bucks.

*What is your favorite NBA memory?*

Being able to watch Michael Jordan, play against him, and be the last guy to beat him in a playoff situation [with the Orlando Magic in 1996]. I heard a stat recently: The 2007–2008 NBA season was the first in 10 years that Tim Duncan or myself were not in the NBA Finals. If you look back, so many people said, 'Oh, he's doing albums and movies, he'll never win!' Then I got four [laughs].

*Which accomplishment makes you prouder—winning an NBA title or getting a platinum plaque for Shaq Diesel?*

Don't want to sound arrogant—but I knew I was going to get an NBA ring. Me playing 15 or 20 years, I knew I was going to catch one. [But] I'm proud of the platinum plaque. All rappers want to play ball and all ballplayers want to be rappers. I'm just a guy who brought them together.

*Chris Yuscavage*



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