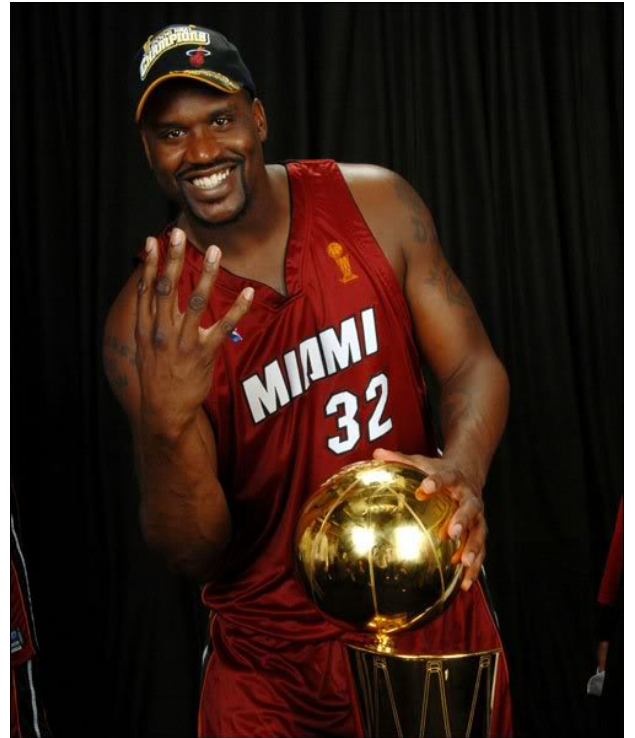


One For The Thumb?

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Friday, June 26 2009 7:00 PM -

You knew the naysayers would come out. Most national, very few here on the north coast. But they're out there. Saying Shaq is over the hill. Shaq will clog the lane. Shaq's ego isn't compatible with LeBron's. Shaq's too slow. Shaq's a one-year bandage. Jerry Roche has a message for the haters. Don't tug on Superman's cape.



If you're an NBA fan and you're not from Cleveland, you think the Cavaliers just made a big mistake by trading Ben Wallace and Sasha Pavlovic to the Phoenix Suns for Shaquille O'Neal. In all probability, you are laughing your jollies off, especially if you're from Los Angeles or Orlando.

Even the more rational national media pundits apparently agree. Those eternal pessimists cite numerous drawbacks to the trade:

"Shaq is over the hill."

"Shaq will clog the lane."

"Shaq's ego isn't compatible with LeBron's.""Shaq's too slow."

"Shaq's a one-year bandage."

What they are all forgetting is that Shaq is not too old or too slow or too big or too self-centered to accept a challenge. And the more he hears that he's not what the city of Cleveland wants him to be, the more he will do everything possible to prove all those national naysayers wrong. As Jim Croce warned in 1972 -- the year that Shaq (not Dwight Howard) was born -- "Don't tug on Superman's cape."

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Earning a share of four NBA titles with three different teams, Shaq has proven over the years that he has the eye of the tiger and the heart of a lion. All that remains -- more than ever -- is to prove to the world that he's the greatest center in the history of the sport (which he obviously believes). You want to see determination? Look into Shaq's eyes before the tip-off of the Cavaliers' next season opener. What you're likely to see is the steely gaze of Kevin Garnett or Mike Singletary or Jack Lambert blazing back at you. He might be smiling and joking around, but his eyes will betray him.

All those national pundits cited above might admit that Shaq's mind is indeed more than willing. But they are also asking, "Is the body weak?"

Hey, Shaq will be able to monster-dunk from a wheelchair when he's 60.

Realistically, though, it's not out of the realm of possibilities that he could have a partial physical breakdown sometime during the next basketball season. He's 37 going on 38, and NBA hardwood is not particularly forgiving, especially over the course of a 15-year career. But he averaged 17 points and 8 rebounds just last season, making it to the end of the year intact. And Zydrunas Ilgauskas is a more-than-capable back-up who will be able to afford Shaq time off whenever his body tells him it's needed. Actually, 24 minutes per game for Shaq and 24 minutes per game for Z doesn't sound too terribly awful, does it?

What's mostly needed is that Shaq is healthy when April and the next playoffs roll around, because two things the Cavs lacked in this season's playoffs were length and athleticism, which the other contenders all possess to some extent. Los Angeles: Paul Gasol, Andrew Bynum, Lamar Odom. Orlando: Dwight Howard, Hedo Turkoglu, Rashard Lewis. Boston: Garnett, dot, dot, dot. Now, with Shaq, the Cavs have James and O'Neal (and, if the PD's Brian Windhorst can be believed, perhaps Rasheed Wallace).

Shaquille O'Neal is not a complete answer to the immediate problems posed by Los Angeles, Orlando and Boston. But he's a step in the right direction.

Shaquille O'Neal is not a long-term answer to the problem of keeping LeBron in Cleveland for at least another three years. But with just one year remaining on his contract, he won't force Dan Gilbert and Danny Ferry to abandon any long-term plans (Chris Bosh, anyone?) that they might

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have.

You don't think a fifth championship ring wouldn't cement Shaq's everlasting legacy? You don't think he doesn't know it ("One for my thumb!")?

Go ahead, naysayers. I dare ya. Keep tugging on Shaq's cape.