

## *Shaquille O'Neal—Man of Steel*

### **Ch. 1 – SUPER-SHAQ**

The date is March 6, 2000. The Los Angeles Lakers are playing their cross-town rivals, the L.A. Clippers. Number 34 pushes and shoves his way into position. A defender tries to stop him, but can't—and for good reason. Number 34 is too big and too strong. He stands 7 feet 1 inch tall, and weighs 320 pounds. His feet are so big that he wears a size 22 shoe. Tattooed on his left arm are the Superman "S" and the words "Man of Steel." He puts his hand in the air and calls for the basketball. He gets it. And in one smooth move, he turns and slams the ball into the basket. He plays his position, center, like no one else in the league.

Who is Number 34?

Shaquille O'Neal, that's who.

It's Shaq's 28<sup>th</sup> birthday and he's about to make history. By the end of the first half, the Lakers are winning 56-55. Shaq has already scored 26 points. He wonders, "Can I score 50?" He continues to run the floor, and by the end of the third quarter, Shaq has 42 points. Almost there!

In the fourth quarter, Shaq throws down a huge slam, breaking his old record of 53 points. The crowd goes crazy. With 5:25 left, the Lakers are winning, so Shaq listens to the fans and tries for 60. And with just 3:24 left in the game, Shaq slams home his 61<sup>st</sup> point. He is the first Laker since 1969 to score 60 points in a game. Satisfied, he sits down on the team bench. The entire stadium chants "MVP! MVP!" then sings "Happy Birthday" to Shaq.

Shaquille O'Neal gave himself a great birthday present that day. Shaq makes playing basketball look *so* easy. But it's not, even for Shaq. He worked hard for years to become basketball's Man of Steel—Super-Shaq.

## **Ch. 2 – GROWING UP, UP AND AWAY**

Shaquille Rashaun O'Neal was born in a poor part of Newark, New Jersey, on March 6, 1972. The name Shaquille Rashaun is Islamic. It means "little warrior." Shaq, the oldest of four children, has two sisters, LaTeefah and Ayesha, and one brother named Jamal.

When Shaq was just a baby, Philip Harrison married Shaq's mother, Lucille O'Neal. Harrison wanted to give the family a better life, so he joined the U.S. Army and became a drill sergeant. Shaq's dad was strict, but fair. He taught Shaq many lessons. One of the most important lessons was that "The world has too many followers." He told Shaq to be a leader. The guys Shaq saw hanging out on the corner, selling drugs and getting into

trouble were followers. Shaq has said that had it not been for his father, "I'd be a troublemaker on the street."

As a child Shaq lived in many different places. Because his father was in the Army, Shaq and his family often moved from base to base. This meant that Shaq kept leaving his old friends and having to make new ones. During his childhood, he moved from New Jersey to Georgia to West Germany to Texas. He was always "the new kid" in school. And because Shaq was so big, he stuck out like a sore thumb.

Shaq was embarrassed by his size. He just wanted to be normal and look like everyone else. But he didn't—he was super-sized! When he was eight years old, he was 4 feet 9 inches tall. At ten, he was 5 feet 3 inches tall. And by age 13, Shaq was 6 feet 8 inches tall! He wore a size 17 shoe. That's about fifteen inches long! To make things worse, he was clumsy. He played football, baseball, and basketball, but he wasn't very good at any of them. The other kids teased him. But Shaq had a great sense of humor. He thought that if he could make his classmates laugh, they would like him. So, he became the class clown.

While living on an Army base in West Germany, Shaq took part in a basketball camp. The camp was run by a coach named Dale Brown. Brown was the head coach of the Louisiana State University (LSU) Tigers. Shaq asked coach Brown how he could make his legs stronger, "Because I'm 6 feet 8 inches and I can't jump." Coach Brown asked,

"What rank are you soldier?" Shaq told him he wasn't in the Army—he was only 13 years old!

Coach Brown was amazed at the boy's size. He realized that with the proper training, maybe, one day Shaq could be a basketball superstar. The coach asked to speak with Shaq's father. He wanted the family to consider sending Shaq to LSU when he was old enough for college. Shaq's dad said he would consider it—but only if Shaq got a good education and didn't just play basketball. Coach Brown gave his word on that. And for the next four years, Shaq and Coach Brown were penpals.

As Shaq grew older, basketball became more important to him. His childhood hero had always been Julius "Dr. J" Erving, who played basketball for the Philadelphia 76'ers. But Shaq's first love wasn't basketball. It was music and dancing, and young Shaq wanted to be a TV star. He loved to break dance. Shaq could even spin on his head! But he continued to grow and grow. And by the time Shaq was 14 years old, his body was just too big to balance on his head anymore. So he started to focus on something his body *was* made for—basketball.

Even though Shaq had been working on his basketball skills, he was still cut from his 9<sup>th</sup> grade team. The coach said that Shaq was too clumsy and that his big feet got in the way. Shaq was very sad and disappointed, but he didn't give up. Instead, he worked even harder. He focused on both basketball *and* schoolwork. He practiced and studied and practiced and studied. Like his father had taught him, Shaq wanted to be a leader. He

wanted to be the best. His dream became playing in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and winning the Championship.

In spring 1987, the family moved to San Antonio, Texas. Shaq enrolled at Robert G. Cole Senior High School as a 15-year-old sophomore. He continued to study hard while still practicing basketball every day. Finally, the hard work started to pay off. Not only did he make the basketball team, but he was the starting center. And during his junior and senior years, Shaq led the Cole Senior High basketball team to a 68-1 record.

But still, there were bad days. What Shaq has called "the worst moment of my life," happened during a game his junior year of high school. Shaq committed four fouls in the first two minutes. He was benched for almost the entire game. His coach put him back in as the clock ticked down. Shaq's team was losing by one point. There were only ten seconds left. Then, Shaq was fouled. He had to shoot two free throws. If he made the free throws, his team would win and go to the state finals.

Shaq missed them both.

Shaq took the loss hard. He knew that he had let his team down. He felt terrible for weeks. Shaq's father told him, "Don't worry about it. Work on your free throws, come back and win it next year." He did just that. The next year, Shaq led his team to a victory in the State Championship.

Over his two years at Cole High School, he averaged 32 points, 22 rebounds and 8 blocked shots per game. Shaq had become one of the top high school players in the country.