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Shaq: The Latest Impact Player

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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They are called impact players. The kind of player who can come into a league and make an immediate impact on a team, and even on a league. They are few and far between. The Orlando Magic has one. At 7'1" and around 300 pounds he is what Al McGuire termed an aircraft carrier, and Dick Vitale calls a space eater. Either description will do. He is Shaquille O'Neal. The Shaq.

In his first week in the NBA he was player of the week. In November he was Rookie of the Month, and had already locked up most of the votes for Rookie of the Year. On November 15, he was on the cover of the New York Times Magazine. Two weeks later he was on the cover of Sports Illustrated. Major stories on the 20 year old phenom were in both publications.

On the first Left Coast trip for the Magic, the Shaq was on the Arsenio Hall Show, where he displayed his new found skills as a rap singer, performing the new rap single he has recorded with Fu-Schnickens. More importantly he displayed a refreshing modesty and level head. Last Sunday he was the ESPN Sunday night conversation, and quietly and matter of factly predicted that in the next ten years he will lead the Magic to two NBA championships. He wasn't bragging, just trying to realistically anticipate what is ahead in his career. Impact.

O'Neal was the first pick in the NBA draft and signed a \$40M seven year contract. Reebok and Spalding have signed him to lucrative endorsement contracts, while there are several more companies waiting in the wings. He is still a long ways from Michael's \$36M worth of endorsements, but then he has played less than twenty NBA regular season games.

At the gate he has made another kind of impact. Although ticket sales have always been brisk for Magic games and most games were sellouts, it seemed that if you wanted a ticket you could get one at face value for most games. This is now true for only a few games. On the road the Magic are suddenly an attraction, and sellouts have begun to appear for Magic games in distant cities. The Shaq is a scalpers delight. Impact.

At the O-rena itself the crowd gets into a frenzy when Shaq gets his hands on the ball, and when he makes a move to the basket for the slam, the crowd erupts. When he blocks a shot, there is an explosion. Whatever he does the crowd reacts. Impact.

Anyone who saw the Magic over the past two seasons, and sees them now, can see the difference. It isn't just in the wins, or in the quality of play. It is also in the level of intensity that other teams bring to a game with the Magic. Pre-Shaq a game against the Magic was a night off, a breather in the schedule, a chance to relax. No more. Everyone now knows they must be ready to play against Orlando or they will pay. The team is defended differently, and therefore the offensive opportunities are different.

What will be the impact in the standings? It is still much too early to tell. The Shaq will need to adjust to the League, and the League will need to adjust to Shaq. And remember basketball is still a team sport, and it takes a combination of eight or nine quality players and role players to make a contender, and then a champion. The Magic are still a long ways from that level of personnel. They still need a few more players the caliber of Scott and Anderson, and they still need a number of critical role players; the kind of players who might start on some teams but are content to make significant contributions to championship teams coming off the bench.

For those who are already over-excited and ready to buy playoff tickets, a caution. This is a long season, and the NBA really plays four seasons. There is the warm up and shake down until Christmas, then the fine tuning is done in January and February. The playoff drive marks the third season and finally, the playoffs. At each stage the level of play is turned up a notch, and the contenders are separated from the pretenders. It is now early December. We are still in stage one.

For the NBA Shaquille O'Neal has arrived just at the right time. Magic Johnson and Larry Bird are gone, and Michael may have only a few more seasons to go. The NBA badly needs a new generation of superstars, and with the Shaq they have at least one. Alonzo Morning may turn out to be another. Impact.

It is also interesting to note that with the decline and departure of Kareem Abdul Jabaar there were those who had written off the dominant center as a thing of the past in the NBA. They might have spoken too soon. Shaquille O'Neal clearly belongs in that long line of dominating centers that started with George Mikan of the Minneapolis Lakers, and went through from Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell to Kareem. We all know the impact these great centers had on their teams.

I saw a former student, an artist, the other day. We had an animated conversation in a supermarket aisle about the Magic. He perhaps better than anyone I have heard, summarized the impact of Shaquille O'Neal. "I have never lived in a major league city before," he said, "and boy is this ever fun." It might even be Super Shaqadocious.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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