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Big Enough to Take on the Sports World



By [JOE RHODES](#)

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SANTA MONICA, Calif

Shaquille O’Neal, whose Twitter page self-description is “Very Quotatious.” was sprawled on the floor of an empty conference room at the Loew’s Santa Monica Beach hotel; just him, his buddy/bodyguard/”uncle” Jerome Crawford and a stack of empty chairs. In a half-hour he’d be heading down for a poolside press conference, in a dress shirt, vest and tie, a diamond stud in his left ear, drumming up interest in his latest self-promotional adventure, an ABC reality show called “Shaq Vs.” that premieres this Tuesday at 9 p.m.

There -- the beach, breaking waves, palm trees and strategically-placed “Shaq Vs.” logos behind him – he’d do what he does best, talk about himself for fun and profit. Answering questions, some of them planted by the

show’s producers, he explained how he’d come up with the idea of trying to beat some of the highest-profile athletes in the world at their own games.

On the show, he’ll play 7-on-7 football against quarterback Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers, swim against Michael Phelps, get into the ring with former boxing champion Oscar DeLaHoya, go against St. Louis Cardinals slugger Albert Pujols in a home run derby and, in the particular competition he was promoting this day, play beach volleyball against Olympic Gold Medalists Misti May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh. The moderator of the press conference, also being filmed as part of the show, winkingly called it a “Battle of The Sexes,” a theme both Mr. O’Neal and his opponents happily embraced.

“I’ve been putting sand in my salad. I eat sand,” Mr. O’Neal said, with a mock-menacing mumble, asked how he’d been preparing. “I want to thank both these beautiful ladies for accepting this challenge. I hope they don’t mess up their nails too much.

“To beat Shaq, which we plan on doing, will be a good thing for all women” Ms. Walsh said, adding that if Mr. O’Neal loses, he had agreed to walk two miles through Santa Monica wearing nothing but a pink Speedo, “three sizes too small.”

“So I hope he’s doing some lunges,” she said, “to get those buns in shape.”

“Don’t worry,” he replied. “I’ll do it. Two miles. Swishing. So you can see the movement of the buttocks.”

Earlier in the conference room, not yet in full huckster mode, Mr. O’Neal explained that he had indeed concocted the show himself, egged on by Mr. Crawford, his advisor and confidante since he was a teenager.

“Every male has a little bit of couch potato bravado when they’re watching sports on television,” Mr. O’Neal said. “They see someone make a mistake and think, ‘I could do better than that. And me, as a superb athlete, I see Ben Roethlisberger throw a pass in the corner and I think, if I had the same blocking, I could make that pass.

“I think if Michael Phelps had to go up and back in the pool and I just gotta go up, then I could beat him. If I’m racing Lance Armstrong 10 miles on a bicycle and I get a four-mile head start, I’m gonna beat him. That’s what I think. “And Jerome said, ‘You out your damn mind.’”

“So we decided to come up with the show and mix it in with cross-training for me to get ready for the events,” he said. He also saw it as a way to spice up his off-season training regimen, after being traded to the Cleveland Cavaliers and going into what may be his final season in the NBA.

“I get tired of doing the same thing every day, twice a day, going to 24-hour Fitness and running stairs and lifting weights,” he said, “I thought, why not train with some of my favorite athletes instead and have fun while I’m doing it?”

He pitched the idea to Media Rights Capital, a production company who partnered with Dick Clark

Productions and sold the series to ABC. It will run for at least five episodes and maybe six if Lance Armstrong, who wants to do the show, can re-arrange some prior commitments.

“When you think about it’s kind of surprising that no one has done this before,” said MRC co-CEO Modi Wiczuk. “It not only addresses that classic sports radio of argument of who would beat who if athletes tried different sports , but Shaq is such an incredibly compelling personality. Everybody wanted it.

The challenge, Mr. Wiczuk said, was to make sure the athletes involved not only had marquee value of their own, but that the competitions be handicapped in such a way that Mr. O’Neal would have a reasonable chance of winning. So, Mr. Phelps will get a considerable head start, as would Mr. Armstrong. For the volleyball challenge, Mr. O’Neal will have professional volleyball player Todd Rodgers as a teammate. There will be similar adjustments – not yet revealed – for the baseball and boxing challenges.

“We wanted to generate genuine competitions that were intense and required a lot of effort without endangering him,” Mr. Wiczuk said, adding that particular care was taken with the Oscar DeLaHoya challenge. “We won’t need a fight doctor. No one wants to see anyone get hurt.”

Much of the pre-show attention has centered not on Mr. O’Neal’s opponents, but on the one prominent athlete, soccer star David Beckham, who, after some preliminary discussions, declined to participate, citing scheduling difficulties.

Mr. O'Neal responded by using his Twitter page, and an appearance on the paparazzi website TMC, to accuse Mr. Beckham of being scared. At the Santa Monica press conference, he referred to him as "Davina Beckham."

"I'm not picking on him. If he's sensitive, that's not my problem," Mr. O'Neal said, when asked about the cyber-taunts. "I just think if you put him back at a distance, he can't score on me. Up close, he'll probably score 11 out of 11 times. But you put him back where I can see the ball coming and I've got time to react? He can't do it."

Is Mr. O'Neal really angry at Mr. Beckham. No. "You gotta understand that when it comes to marketing, I'm an expert," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

"If I didn't like the guy, I'd just go to his house and go, "David you got something to say, say it to me." But the fans love it. It's free marketing. Everything I do is planned."

If "Shaq Vs." is a hit, Mr. O'Neal says there are already athletes who would like to be part of a second season. He'd love to run against sprinter Usain Bolt, play tennis against Serena Williams (who helped "coach" him for the volleyball match) and maybe even skateboard a half-pipe with Tony Hawk. If he does indeed retire after next season, something he says would be more likely if he wins an NBA championship with the Cavaliers, O'Neal says he'd be free to try riskier challenges.

"Me and my man (Jerome) have been talking about running with the bulls

in Spain. We're gonna do it someday. We've already got our strategy. Whoever is next to us, they're gonna be sacrificed. If you're next to us, in front or behind and we see the bull, you're getting sacrificed."

"I'd love to race a car, but right now I don't think (NBA commissioner) David Stern would allow it," he said. "But if I retire there's a lot of things I could do.. Maybe next year it'll be Shaq vs. China, or Shaq vs. Russia. There's many places we can go with this."

Joe Rhodes is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.

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