

America antes up in poker's rebirth

So there I was, the short stack as usual, waiting for a couple of decent hole cards to go all-in, and I'm dealt a queen and a four, suited. Those aren't particularly good cards, so I auto-fold and decide to wait and try my luck next hand.



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The flop brings up a pair of fours, so I had already folded trips. The turn wasn't much help, and lo and behold, the river brings up a queen. The guy who won the hand had a pocket pair and walked away with a fairly large amount of money — my money.

Like golf, poker is a game that usually brings a lot more pain and suffering than it does joy. But just when you're ready to quit, you hit that perfect tee shot, or you get exactly the card you need on the river, and you're sucked right back in.

My cousin has a quote on his Instant Messenger profile that goes something like this: "I've been playing poker for 12 months, and I've been trying to quit for 11. What a game."

The popularity of poker has increased dramatically over the past few years. Television shows such as World Series of Poker and

World Poker Tour have enjoyed success because so many people are learning the game.

Vegas seems to be doing just fine as well. Last Thursday, Harrah's announced it is buying rival casino Caesar's for \$5 billion, making it the nation's largest casino company.

Although casino revenue growth has slowed to a crawl, down from nearly 21 percent in 1999 to a paltry 1.9 percent last year according to American Gaming Association figures, the acquisition is a clear indicator companies are determined to capitalize on poker's renaissance.

Why is poker so popular now? In addition to the aforementioned addictive characteristic, it's cool.

In the Houston Chronicle, Marcus Allen was quoted as saying, "If you want to be cool now, you've got to play poker."

Recent films such as "Rounders" and "Ocean's Eleven" glamorize gambling, poker in particular, and those are just a couple.

What isn't cool about having a guy named Chris MoneyMaker being one of the best poker players in the world? I don't know if that's his real name, but who cares?

Wouldn't it be rad if Joe Montana were Joe Touchdown? Or if Barry Bonds were Barry Boomstick? You just don't have stuff like that in other sports.

O'Neal happy to be in Miami, promises NBA championship

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI — Several thousand fans were waiting Tuesday at the Miami Heat's arena when Shaquille O'Neal arrived in the cab of a semi-tractor, pulling a trailer with the words "Diesel Power" on the side.

O'Neal climbed out, used a plastic water cannon to douse fans and walked along a red carpet to the steps leading to the entrance of the American Airlines Arena, where he pledged that another celebration is in the Heat's future.

"Remember this — I'm going to bring a championship to Miami," O'Neal said. "I promise."

The Heat held the rally to welcome O'Neal six days after acquiring him in a trade that sent three starters to the Los Angeles Lakers.

In a 10-minute ceremony, O'Neal received keys to both the city of Miami and Miami-Dade County from Mayors Manny Diaz and Alex Penelas, respectively.

Penelas, who is more than a foot shorter than the 7-foot-1 O'Neal, stood on a chair so they were eye-to-eye during the presentation.

At a news conference inside the arena that followed, O'Neal said he enjoyed his arrival.

"I told my wife when I was rolling up, I felt like the president," he said. O'Neal then

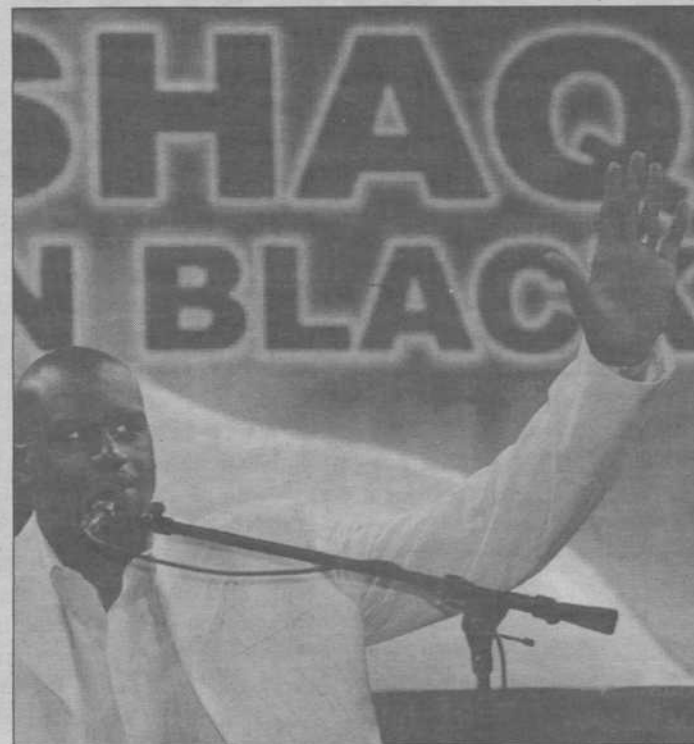


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Shaquille O'Neal thanks the Miami fans that showed up to welcome the newest member of the Heat.

hummed "Hail to the Chief."

After differences with Kobe Bryant and Lakers management led to the trade, O'Neal said he appreciates the way he has been embraced by the city of Miami.

"That has nothing to do with basketball," he said. "That's just because I'm sexy."

O'Neal said he looks forward to helping Heat president Pat Riley recruit free agents to fill the roster spots still open — those vacated by Miami sending center Brian Grant and for-

wards Caron Butler and Lamar Odom to the Lakers in exchange for the 11-time NBA All-Star.

Over 12 seasons, O'Neal has averaged 27.1 points, 12.1 rebounds and 2.6 blocks per game. He was attracted to the Heat in large part because of young Dwyane Wade, and was impressed by the Heat's surprising run to the Eastern Conference semifinals last season.

"They didn't have a lot of talent on their team, but they had a great team," he said. "I wanted to come to a great team."

Coaches

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"I am a lot better off from the standpoint that I have more to deal with than last year at this time," Stansbury said. "I return three starters and lost two valuable players."

Like the Gamecocks, Arkansas is another team on the rise. Second-year coach Stan Heath is

returning 11 players and likes what he has for this year, even though he lost top recruit Al Jefferson to the pros.

"Going into this season, we really feel this is the first year we have a full roster, having size and returning players that were key for us," Heath said. "We are really working hard to prove ourselves this summer and get ready for the season."

Tennessee is also ready for a

breakout season with 90 percent of its scoring and rebounding, including guard C.J. Watson, returning for head coach Buzz Peterson.

LSU's squad will look familiar as head coach John Brady gets all but star Jamie Lloreda back. Kentucky, always a conference contender, lost five seniors but will still return veterans like Keleena Azubuike.

The Florida Gators also have

three big names back in Anthony Roberson, David Lee and Matt Walsh, while Alabama and Auburn's cupboards aren't bare, either.

With the rich getting richer and the mediocre improving, the SEC could be in store for another tight conference race and NCAA Tournament success. As far as who has an edge in returnees, Georgia head coach Dennis Felton, who has the fewest re-

turning scholarship players in the SEC, thinks it could be the usual names.

"The best roster of talent, including their recruiting classes, I would say Kentucky, Florida, Mississippi State and Alabama. Those are teams that strike me and seem to have the strongest teams returning."

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