

Accepting No Charity

They're free throws, to anyone
but Shaquille O'Neal, who
provided the Pacers with a
late-game strategy.

By Conrad Brunner
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It's a childhood injury that limits the flexibility in his wrist.
It's input overload, with too many people offering too many solutions.
It's the pressure he only feels at the free-throw line.
It's his oversized hands, which affect his grip.
It's because he doesn't bend his knees, or put enough arc on the shot.
It's a lack of practice.
It's too much practice.

The reasons are almost as plentiful as the excuses, but the problem remains unsolved. For all his abilities, Shaquille O'Neal remains baffled by the most elemental shot in the game: the free throw.

It is a problem he vows to correct, but heading into tonight's Game 4 of the NBA Finals against the Indiana Pacers, it remains a potentially fatal flaw for the Los Angeles Lakers center.

"It's just vital that I go to the line and just make 'em . . . if we want to win the whole thing, I just have to step up and do it," O'Neal said Tuesday. "And I will. I'm not worried."

In the Finals, O'Neal is shooting 37 percent (22-of-58) from the line. In the Lakers' 100-91 loss in Game 3, he missed 10 free throws; his team lost by nine points. In Game 2, his 5-of-17 shooting in the first half encouraged the Pacers to use the "Hack-a-Shaq" defensive tactic in the fourth quarter, sending him to the foul line at every opportunity, in an attempted comeback that fell short.

O'Neal has been the single most dominant force in the series, averaging 38.7 points, 18.7 rebounds and 2.67 blocked shots. He's also shooting .644 from the field, with most of his shots coming with two or three defenders in his path, bumping and grabbing, trying everything possible to stop him.

At the free-throw line, he's all alone, taking an uncontested shot. But it's there that suddenly the Most Valuable Player in the league suddenly becomes Chris Dudley.

"I think everything happens for a reason," O'Neal said. "I think my game, being the way it is, if I did shoot 80 percent, I'd be a harder person to deal with. It keeps me humble.

"Just imagine me and my game, shooting the same percentage as Reggie Miller. I wouldn't even talk to (the media) because I wouldn't have to."

Perhaps the one person O'Neal should talk to is one of his opponents.

Indiana power forward Dale Davis had much the same problem, shooting .510 from the line through his first eight seasons. But Davis hooked up with shooting coach **Tom Nordland** last summer, devoted himself to the task, and shot up to .685 during the regular season.

If Davis can do it, why can't O'Neal?

"Unless you just have terrible form, I don't think it's physical," said Davis. "I think a lot more of it's mental. The more you shoot 'em in game situations, the better off you'll be in gaining your confidence."

Nordland is convinced O'Neal has many of the same flaws as Davis, and that they can be corrected.

"You can see he's not getting any arc, he's not bending his legs consistently, the shot is very flat and he has no control over the flight of the ball," Nordland said. "I think a lot of coaches think it's mental. They think if he can make 8-of-10 in practice, he's OK. But when the pressure's on, those flaws become more apparent."

When Phil Jackson took over as coach before this season, he brought along assistant Tex Winter and assigned him the task of working with O'Neal on his form.

"I started working with Shaq, but he wasn't very receptive for some reason," Winter said. "I told him we had to restructure his shot and he didn't think that was necessary. It was just a question of the law of readiness. He wasn't ready to accept my coaching."

The potential impact of O'Neal's improvement at the line is compelling. Had he hit 70 percent during the regular season, his scoring average would have jumped nearly two full points to 31.5. That would have been the highest for a center since Kareem Abdul-Jabbar averaged 34.8 in 1971-72.

Already an awesome force, O'Neal would become thoroughly unstoppable with competency at the free-throw line.

"If he was doing that," said teammate Derek Fisher, "you'd have to change the rules of the game."

At the very least, he would have altered the perspective of this series.

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