

BENCHMARK • P

Speedier than a Meteor



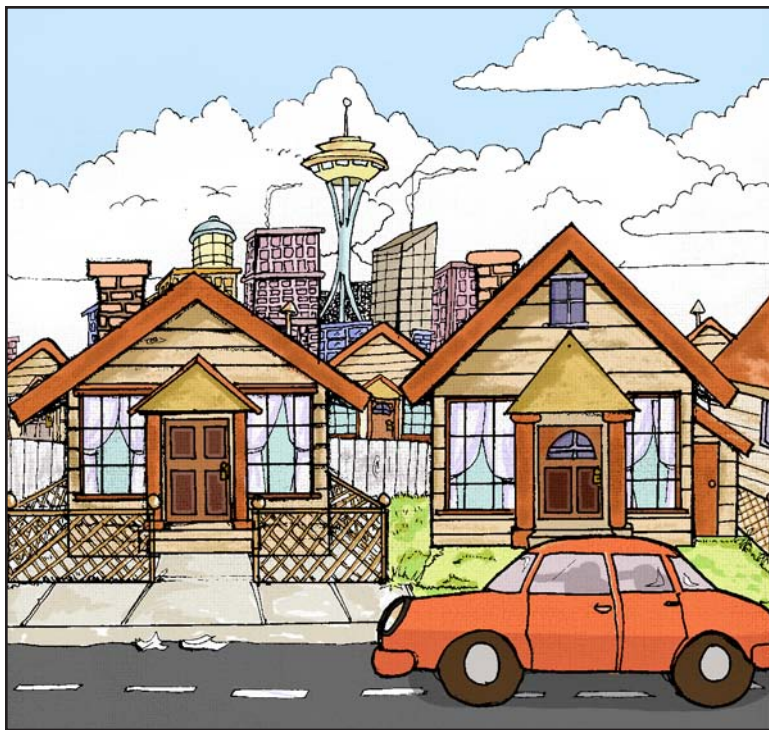
Written by Stephen Cosgrove
Illustrated by Kevin McCarthy

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I live in Seattle, Washington.

I know what you're thinking. You're just like my cousin who came up here from Los Angeles thinking that everybody in the Northwest lives in the forest. I live in the city, the inner city, and there aren't many trees on the street where I live.

My name is Shaquille O'Neal, and no, not that one.

I love my name, and at the same time,
I hate my name.

My mom and dad are big basketball fans, and when I was born they thought the real Shaq was better than the smell of a new car. About the only things Shaq and I have in common are that we are both black, have the same name, and love basketball. There are a few things that we don't share. He's in his thirties, and I am in my nines. He is very tall, and I am very short (even for being in my nines). He is the best basketball player in the world, and I am the worst basketball player in the world.

Plus, he is rich, and I am poor.

Like him, I love basketball—it is the best sport in the world. There is nothing better.

But last year was the worst, the absolute worst.

We usually start playing basketball in late September. Every Saturday, without fail, the Central District's Boys and Girls Club sponsors league-play for all age groups. My age group, 9 to 11, is the biggest.

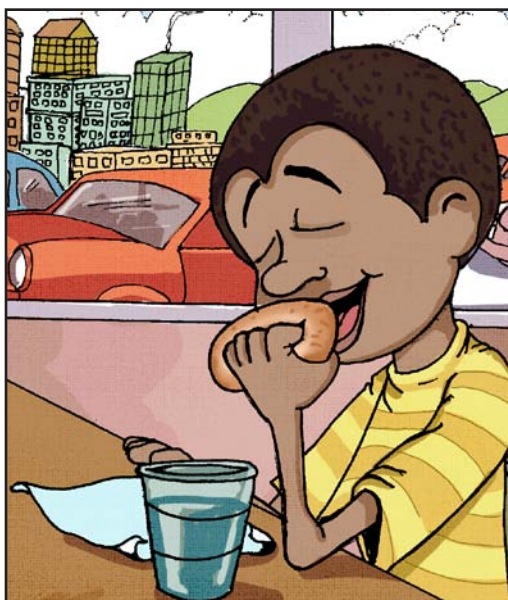
As usual, my dad was excited about basketball season. After getting home from the cleaners where he works, and all through dinner, all he talks about is basketball. Most of all, he talks about me playing basketball. I'm his very own personal Shaquille O'Neal.



But my dad never figured out that I wasn't very big. At eight years old, I was barely tall enough to look over the kitchen counter. A basketball was almost bigger than I was. But I tried really hard because, like I said, I like basketball. It just didn't start out liking me.

My dad would drive me to the Boys and Girls Club at 8 o'clock every Saturday morning on his way to work. He would stop in at the doughnut shop and get coffee, hot chocolate, and some glazed doughnuts.

As he slurped his coffee and munched a doughnut, he would talk about how much fun I was going to have.



Then he'd drop me off, and I would stand around until they unlocked the doors at 9 o'clock.

Then I would go inside and stand around until they started choosing teams.

Then I would stand around while they chose everybody else.

Then I would stand around being the only one left.

Then somebody would have to pick me.

"But coach, he's too little."

"Ah, but with Shaquille O'Neal on your team, you can't help but win."

Then everyone would laugh, the team would pick me, and everyone would make fun of me because of my name and my size.

Then I would sit around while all the other kids played basketball.

Then I would stand around after they closed the Boys and Girls Club and wait for my dad to pick me up after work.

Then I would tell my dad how great I was and how much fun I'd had.

Then we would go home, and I would go into my room and feel really mad. Why did I have to be so small, and why did I have to have such a big name?

It wasn't until the end of November that I got to really play at all. It wasn't that



I got better, because I hardly got to play until then. It was just that a lot of kids went away for Thanksgiving weekend, and then it was the beginning of flu season. I didn't get sick, and I got to play on one of the teams almost regularly.

The only problem was that I still couldn't play worth beans! I was shorter than short, and I could barely dribble the ball, let alone shoot it.

I tried to make up for my rotten playing by being really aggressive. I would always defend the biggest kid on the other team. I would always get flattened, and I would always get a bloody nose.



The Boys and Girls Club has a great nurse's room. I know because I spent more time in there than on the court. The nurse was a Vietnamese lady, and because none of the kids could pronounce her name, they called her Skimmy. Skimmy didn't know anything about basketball or any other American sports, but she was nice and had a pretty smile.



By the last game and my twelfth nosebleed, Skimmy was my friend. It was she who finally helped me become a better player. “Mr. Shaq,” she said one Saturday, “I watch you play. You always get hurt. Why do you play that way? Why don’t you take advantage of what you are? I watch you—you are fast. You are speedier than a meteor. Why don’t you get faster?”

What Skimmy had said kind of made sense. It made a lot of sense.

From then on, I never walked anywhere—I ran. And when I ran, I dribbled a basketball. I dribbled in the house until my mom yelled at me. I dribbled in the driveway, and I dribbled to the bus stop to go to school. I dribbled at school whenever I could.

Kids still made fun of me, but I was running so fast, I couldn’t hear half of what they said.



All through the heat of the summer,
I ran and dribbled and dribbled and ran.
And Skimmy was right—I got faster and
faster and better and better.

Come the end of September, I was
waiting as usual for them to unlock the
Boys and Girls Club.

As usual, I got chosen last.

But this year I got to play. The team
captain, Louis Bidwell, didn't want me
on his team at all, but I was last and he
was last.

He was stuck. There was a new rule this year that everybody got to play in every game. With our team down six points and with only four minutes to go, Louis, by the rule, had to put me in or forfeit the game. With a loud groan, he took out Sally Brown.

“Just stay out of the way,” he threatened.



I didn't stay out of the way—I got in the way in a big way. The first time the other team started down the court, I slipped in there fast and stripped the ball away. Just like that I was dribbling the other way.

Louis was running behind me shouting, “Shoot it! Shoot it!”



There was a guard in front of me, his big arms spread out like an octopus. I planted my foot and started up, but I didn't shoot— instead I passed that ball just as hard as I could to Louis.

He didn't expect it. The ball hit him right in the gut, and his eyes bulged out in surprise and pain. But I've got to give it to Louis, at least he had the sense to shoot it—swish, all net.

The rest of the game went like that—I got the ball, I raced down the court, and I passed off to Louis. We won! Because of me, we won!



After the game, I told my dad what had happened. He was just about as proud as could be. “Hey,” he said when we pulled up to the house, “how come you never shot the ball?”

“Well,” I said, “I practiced running, and I really am speedier than a meteor. I practiced dribbling, and there is nobody who can dribble better than I can. But I never practiced shooting, and I’m still rotten at that!”

My dad laughed all the way into the house. It’s still one of his favorite family stories to tell.

Basketball season is over, and all I do every day is run, dribble, and shoot. Without practice nothing gets perfect—just ask the real Shaq about his free throw shooting. He’s really rotten—maybe he ought to practice, too.

Speedier than a Meteor
Level P Benchmark Book
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Learning A–Z
Written by Stephen Cosgrove
Illustrated by Kevin McCarthy

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