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Shaq's been on TV nonstop during the NBA playoffs—but here's the strange tale of how he avoided FTX crypto class action papers for months

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Shaquille O'Neal evaded servers for months.

DEREK WHITE—GETTY IMAGES

All weekend, the two process servers had been doing drive-bys at an estate 30 miles southeast of Atlanta in a quest to confront its famous owner. Since the 14-acre residence in the quiet hamlet of McDonough, Ga. had no intercom, and the fences surrounding the property made it impossible to approach the mansion nestled in the woods, the only option was surveilling the front gates by car. Time was running short: The three-month deadline for serving the summons and complaint fell the next day. To best corner the defendant, the plaintiffs' lawyers were double-teaming him via dispatching not one but two licensed agents. Their routine in conducting this virtual stakeout: Motor by the entrance at frequent intervals, in separate vehicles, one following the other.

After witnessing no activity for almost two days, the duo at 4:00 PM on Sunday, April 16, were performing still another of their tag-team spot-checks when they viewed a black Ford Expedition with black rims pull up to the gates. Behind the wheel was their target, and one of the most recognizable figures on the planet. According to the affidavit from the server we'll call "agent one"—this account is drawn from the two servers' attestations in the case—"I was able to directly observe [Shaquille] O'Neal as the operator of the vehicle. Mr. O'Neal

was wearing green-colored, long-sleeved top.” The servers exited their cars and took positions on opposite sides of the driveway. Each man held up held up legal documents and “raised them into Mr. O’Neal’s direct view,” in the words of agent one.

But even the spectacle of *two* pursuers crowding his driveway while calling his name and brandishing papers didn’t get Shaq to stop. Wrote agent one, “Mr. O’Neal proceeded to drive around me at a high rate of speed.” Seeing that O’Neal had no intention of stopping, the server “tossed the legal documents at the front of Mr. O’Neal’s Expedition” and O’Neal “continued to loudly accelerate away.” Agent two recounts that O’Neal “swerved” onto the shoulder, “revving the engines as he fled the area.” The package of papers bounced off the fenders and fell onto the remote, two-lane country road, where the servers left them. Minutes later, a police car arrived; the officer explained to agent two that he was responding to a call about a “suspicious vehicle/person” parked in this location. The officer appeared satisfied that the servers were just doing their job.

The servers were hounding O’Neal that day to officially make him a defendant, and enable a judge to require his appearance in court, in a highly publicized, multi-billion dollar class action suit brought against eleven celebrities who’d famously promoted the bankrupt crypto exchange FTX. The plaintiff’s attorneys, Adam Moskowitz of Miami’s Moskowitz Law and super-lawyer David Boies of Boies, Schiller, Flexner, claim that they’ve already served the other ten top athletes and media stars, a group that encompasses Tom Brady, Larry David and David Ortiz, mainly months before, usually via the defendants’ lawyers in a courtly process involving little hassle. “Even in the most extreme cases, you don’t see this degree of drama in the mundane area of process serving,” says Alex More, a Dallas attorney who specializes in representing crypto clients. “But here, you have the combination of a legendary athlete, a case involving an explosive failure in the crypto world, and a hunt that kept making headlines. So it’s one for the ages.”

Trying to serve Shaq

Normally, you’d think that Shaq would rank as one of the world’s easiest celebrities to track down. He towers at over 7 feet, and weighs an estimated 350 pounds.

The big push to locate the star started in late February. The following account is based mainly on the details about the search provided in the plaintiffs’ attorneys April 7 filing seeking to serve him via social media, denied by the judge. The Moskowitz-Boies side first concentrated their efforts in Texas, since O’Neal was reportedly spending time in the state expanding his Big Chicken franchise. The servers found that Shaq owns a house in the Houston suburb of Sugar Land. They twice visited the residence when no one was present, learning from the license plate of a car parked in the motor court that it’s home to Arnetta Yardborough. She’s a local life coach and the president of a semi-pro mens’ basketball team who was Shaq’s girlfriend in the mid-1990s; they reportedly met when Shaq was high school star in San Antonio. Shaq and Yardborough share a daughter, Taahira, who grew up in the Sugar Land house. But as the servers were following a false lead. As they soon learned, Shaq doesn’t live there.

The servers couldn’t find any public record of another Lone Star state home owned by Shaquille O’Neal. But from an article in a real estate magazine, they discovered that he’d purchased a residence—apparently not registered in his name—in the city of Carrollton, north of Dallas. By Shaq’s standards, the place is something of a pied a terre. He bought it in spring of 2022 just after selling his 31,000 square foot, waterfront mega-mansion in Orlando. By contrast, the brick-and-stone Carrollton manse occupies one-sixth that size. Unlike the McDonough property, the Carrollton house sits suburban-like, right on a public street. The servers could walk right up to the door and ring the bell. From March 6th to 22nd, a rep made eight visits to the house, but Shaq was never there.

The server had left his business card at the residence. According to the plaintiffs’ filing, after the eighth visit, the server received an anonymous email stating, “Shaq lives in the Bahamas,

u stupid fu–, give my regards to [name of the server’s wife.]” The account goes on to say that upon receiving the message, “[The server] was no longer comfortable attempting to serve Mr. O’Neal with process, fearing for his wife’s safety.” The text’s sender’s identity remains a mystery.

By late March, the plaintiffs’ lawyers had launched a second offensive in Georgia. From March 16 to 23, servers attempted to visit the McDonough residence fifteen times. But they were never able to get past the gates and approach the house. The plaintiffs’ side knew that Shaq was scheduled to do post-game commentary at the TNT studios for the NBA playoffs that started on April 15. Since the McDonough is his regular residence in the Atlanta area, and just a 45-minute drive up Interstate 75 to Turner Broadcasting’s Techwood Campus, they apparently figured that Shaq would eventually drive through those gates. The constant patrols by the double-teaming servers led to the standoff where Shaq allegedly roared away, leaving the documents that the plaintiffs had for months been seeking to place in his hands that performed thousands of dunks stranded on the country road.

In one of the most unorthodox moves in their crazy hunt, the plaintiffs’ lawyers sent the complaint and summons, along with a check for \$50, to the Sheriff’s Office of Henry County, where McDonough’s located. Shaq’s been given an honorary position at the Sheriff’s Office, and he’s clearly proud of his role, having been photographed wearing what must be a custom-made shirt displaying his title as the Director of Community Relations. Law enforcement officials are authorized to serve potential defendants. The Office cashed the check, but sent back a notice of “non-service.”

Shaq himself hasn’t spoken publicly about the saga. *Fortune* reached out to his PR reps, and also to his lawyers for comments beyond those in the court filings, but received no responses.

The Moskowitz-Boies team engaged no fewer than four process serving firms in the search. Their reps attempted to personally serve O’Neal around thirty times at two homes—including his ex-girlfriend’s—that he owns in Texas and the place in McDonough, and camped to no avail outside Turner Broadcasting’s Techwood Center in Atlanta, where Shaq co-hosts “Inside the NBA” on TNT. Numerous [FedEx](#) packages containing the summons and complaint sat unsigned for at on the doorsteps of the various houses. The Moskowitz lawyers even had friends search the Bahamas beaches when that threatening message from an unknown source claimed he’d gone to the island getaway. “We’d even send servers to the concerts and other events where Shaq advertised that he was appearing at DJ Diesel,” recalls Joseph Kaye, a partner at Moskowitz Law. “But every time we’d go, he’d somehow cancel.” Direct messages to his [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts went into the ether, and six lawyers contacted by Moskowitz Law who represented Shaq on past or current matters expressed no knowledge of his whereabouts or declined to cooperate.

Now it’s up to the courts

What they perceived as brazen maneuvers to escape a suit on the part of regular folk bilked by FTX, when his co-defendants accepted service, greatly frustrated the plaintiffs’ lawyers. In a tweet posted in on April 13, Moskowitz fired at O’Neal, “You have been running from us for months. We have been standing outside your TNT studios in Atlanta all week, but your security guards won’t let us in. Only one [defendant] has chosen to evade service.” Moskowitz added that “it’s time” for Shaq “to defend your actions” to all the “thousands of victims who lost their savings in the FTX fraud.”

On May 15, the plaintiffs filed an amended complaint once again listing O’Neal as a defendant. That move would require his attorneys to renew any motion to dismiss him from the case on the grounds that he was improperly served, as well as addressing the extensive new allegations regarding his promotion of FTX. To this point, Shaq’s lawyers have maintained that he’s never been officially served. They write in a prior filing that “Mr. O’Neal has not evaded service by failing to be at the residences where Plaintiffs belatedly

attempted service or by driving past strangers who approached his car.” The lawyers cite that the judge in the case had already rejected the Plaintiffs’ request to serve Shaq via electronically over Twitter, Instagram or email because, he’d allegedly become unreachable by hiding out. Shaq’s counselors, Latham & Watkins and Colson, Hicks, Eidson of Coral Gables, hold that the April 16 encounter in McDonough did not constitute legal service.

Notably, a review of the docket shows that these attorneys accepted service for the other brand ambassadors they represent, including Tom Brady, Gisele Bundchen and Larry David.

If the court agrees that O’Neal was not properly served, it will either need to grant an additional window for service, or dismiss the case against him.

The latter outcome would prove a setback for the plaintiffs by removing Shaq from the current suit, though it wouldn’t influence the class action versus the other defendants. It would force the plaintiffs’ lawyers to craft an entirely new complaint, solely against Shaq. The rub: The class action rules limit the plaintiffs’ recovery to the losses they booked only in what’s called “class or limitations period” prior to the filing of the lawsuit. Since the plaintiff’s lawyers launched the salvo targeting the eleven FTX celebrity promoters in November of 2022, an entirely new case targeting Shaq, filed in late May, would restrict the victims to seeking damages going back only from date as opposed to the November 2022 starting date. Hence, Shaq would escape a lot of the potential liability—client money that vaporized over six months, to be exact—faced by what would then be the ten remaining defendants in the original suit.

Since FTX’s collapse in November of last year, O’Neal has only addressed his role as a brand ambassador once. During an interview a month later on CNBC, asked about the complaint just filed by Moskowitz and Boies, the four-time NBA champ intoned, “A lot of people think I’m involved, but I was just a paid spokesman for a commercial.” Surprisingly, Shaq was anything but positive about crypto in general. “I don’t understand it, so I’ll probably stay away from it until I get a full understanding of what it is,” he explained. “From my experience, it’s too good to be true.”