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## Soup for Shaq

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By *Kyle Stack*  
 Special to *ESPN.com*  
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Of the 3,191 blocks (including playoffs) Shaquille O'Neal made during his 19-season NBA career, he could have yelled "No soup for you!" after virtually any of the send-backs. The line, made famous during a 1995 "The Soup Nazi" episode of "Seinfeld" about an eccentric soup shop owner in New York City, is embedded in pop culture's lexicon. Now that he's retired from the NBA, O'Neal has another reason to recite the line.

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*Original Soupman* Shaquille O'Neal says "I don't really get involved with companies unless I believe in the product."

On Aug. 31, [Original Soupman](#) announced that O'Neal joined the company as an investor, adviser and spokesman. The Staten Island, N.Y.-based company was founded in 1984 by Al Yeganeh, aka The Soupman, who served as the inspiration for the character in the unforgettable "Seinfeld" episode. Even with Baseball Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson on board for several years as an investor, Soupman added O'Neal at a time when they believe growth is right around the corner.

With 15 franchise locations spread throughout seven states, primarily in New York, Soupman will add at least two more locations by 2012, at Universal Studios in Los Angeles and Mohegan Sun Casino in Pocono Downs, Pa.

Soupman's Heat n' Serve frozen collection of five soups are sold in grocery stores in 33 states, including at Winn-Dixie, Albertsons, Kroger, Publix, King Kullen and Hy-Vee. In order to integrate itself even further into what Soupman labels a \$6 billion grocery soup category, the company will release Tetra Pak in February 2012, a non-preservative line of shelf soups that will compete nationally and in Canada with soup can stalwarts Campbell's and Progresso.

Jackson told The Life he would like to see Soupman expand to store chains such as Subway and Starbucks. And Jackson, who claimed he has "a nice piece" in Soupman's holdings, believes that even O'Neal's presence won't overshadow the product.

"The most important thing you can say is not that Reggie likes it or that Shaq is on board," Jackson said via phone. "That's all cool stuff and a nice part of the conversation, but the soup is good and it's healthy."

In a telephone interview with The Life, O'Neal spoke about why he chose to invest in Soupman, his responsibilities with the company and whether there might be a signature Shaq soup on the horizon.

#### **The Life: How did you get connected to Original Soupman?**

**O'Neal:** Well, a cousin for one of the doctors for the Boston Celtics works for [Original Soupman]. [The doctor] was eating their soup one day, I tried it and I thought it was fabulous. They contacted me and asked if I wanted

to be a partner. Hell of a good story and very original, and so am I. I thought it was a perfect match.

**The Life: What impressed you about the company from the outset?**

**O'Neal:** The first thing that impressed me is they have a great product. It's all about the product. I don't really get involved with companies unless I believe in the product. When I had that lobster bisque -- I tell ya -- like 30 chunks of lobster in that thang, boy. I was like, you know what, these guys are doing this just to impress me. So, I actually went out on my own and bought some off the shelf. My chef looked at it and said there was a lot of lobster in that lobster bisque. I was like, "These guys are really good."

**The Life: Why invest in the company, though?**

**O'Neal:** I mean, because I believe in it. It's sort of a business challenge. Right now, they have 15 franchise restaurants, including Mohegan Sun. I'm a very intelligent guy and [executive vice president Sebastian Rametta] is very intelligent, so we're going to use our knowledge to help this company grow. We already got plans. We're talking to other people and other stores, and it's going to be big.

**The Life: Original Soupman describes your role as being in a few different areas. Can you describe what it will comprise?**

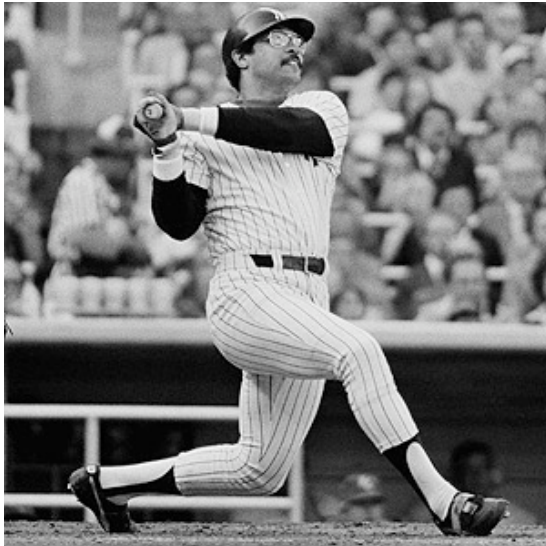
**O'Neal:** Well, I'm gonna be sort of a guy who's endorsing a product. But I'm also going to be working underground. I've made a lot of business connections, a lot of retail connections over the years. So, we're going to try to work the product in those areas. Hopefully, they give us all stores or some stores.

**The Life: What criteria did you and your business management team use to determine Soupman is a good investment?**

**O'Neal:** It is a young company. We like good opportunities; we like to get with young companies that are just coming out. So, the thing I'm doing with [Tout](#), this other thing I did with Power Balance. We like to get with young companies and just help them get to the next level.

**The Life: In addition to the 15 franchises, Soupman is also moving into grocery stores nationwide in 2012, right?**

**O'Neal:** Yes, we're moving into grocery stores, we're going to be in airports, in casinos. That's where me and Sebbie come in. Now that I'm retired, I can take calls, take meetings and fly and meet people. Do all that stuff.



*AP Photo* Yankees great Reggie Jackson is another celebrity investor in The Original Soupman.

**The Life: What growth do you foresee in Soupman as far as the number of franchises and where else it can expand on the grocery side?**

**O'Neal:** I mean, I don't like to predict numbers. Right now, we have 15 [franchises], so we're going to double that and double that and double that. Right now, it's a great company and they're making money. We don't want to expand too quickly and too rapidly. We're just going to take our time and do the correct deals.

**The Life: Will you have a say into which locales Soupman expands?**

**O'Neal:** The good thing about this organization is we're a team. I'm not running the company; I'm not in charge. But I'm going to have some input. As you know, when you're dealing with a team or you're dealing with a bunch of people, you say stuff and sometimes it gets taken; sometimes it doesn't. You know that as a writer, sometimes you want to put something in an article but here comes the editor guy. You know what I'm saying? So, we're going to have meetings. I'm going to have a "say," they're going to have a "say" and ultimately we will make the right decision.

**The Life: You mentioned wanting to learn more about the company. What particular departments do you want to learn about?**

**O'Neal:** I mean, like I said I'm just going help them grow by attending meetings. I'm going to be letting people know [about Soupman] on Twitter, on the OriginalSoupman.com about the products. I'm not going to be taking over the company. We already have a CEO. I'm just a partner. And I just think I'm on a winning team.

**The Life: Were you looking for a product to invest in that could be marketed easily on Tout?**

**O'Neal:** Not really. It just came to me. I always look for two things: what's next and what's going to be huge. And soup is a \$6 billion industry in the grocery stores alone. That does not include restaurants or branded product placement. We just want to tap into that business. Twenty percent of \$6 billion .... you do the math.

**The Life: What does Tout do to help enhance Soupman's awareness?**

**O'Neal:** Tout is fabulous because there are a lot of people who have Twitter typos, if you know what I mean.

With Tout, I can't tell someone to go do a Tout for me. With Tout, people get to see me, see what I'm doing, get to see my passion and they get to laugh. That's why I'm glad Tout came to us. My slogan is, "Why Tweet when you can Tout."

**The Life: Do you think marketing Soupman on Tout will hit a different target market for Soupman?**

**O'Neal:** We're going to use all avenues of marketing. I'm not going to use just Tout. I'm going to be in meetings. We have four or five meetings set up with major companies that I will attend, and I will be handling the presentation. I think I'm a good seller.

**The Life: I should rephrase that last question. Will your involvement with Soupman help them open a different target market for them?**

**O'Neal:** Yes, it will. We're just looking to expand. Like I said, I've met a lot of people and I've made a lot of connections. We're just trying to partner up with other franchises and make it bigger.

“



If someone brings it to you and it's too good to be true, then it's probably no good. ... The second thing I learned is that if you believe in a product, then go with it. Don't worry about the money. ... And third, listen to the Alan Greenspans of the world and study.

” -- *Shaquille O'Neal*

**The Life: What was the size of the investment you made in Soupman?**

**O'Neal:** I can't tell you that. I don't think that's important. I'm not one of those guys who like to brag about what they do. You know what I'm saying? I'm just a clean-cut businessman who likes to do good business, and I believe in the company. I'm their Superman.

**The Life: Are you going to have a soup named after you?**

**O'Neal:** We talked about a Shaq-and-Noodle soup. Right now, they all have all the other flavors. I think we're doing a kid's soup. Low in fat, low in carbs; really good for the kids.

**The Life: Have you taken more interest in endorsing healthy food? I know you endorse Oreos, but have you taken more of an interest in healthy food?**

**O'Neal:** I mean, I just want to do great products. Everybody likes Oreos. Oreos are like a lifestyle brand. If you're trying to work out and other stuff, Oreos are not for you. However, every cookie is 100 calories or less. So, if you take the Oreo then just take two or three, bro. You don't have to eat the whole pack, bro.

**The Life: Your investment strategy since 2008, when the U.S. economy started to go downhill. Has that changed?**

**O'Neal:** Yes, it has changed. Everyone has to downsize. I've had to downsize staff, salaries and I've had to let a couple businesses go. But if I was the only one in the world who had to do that, I would be sick right now. That's the way of life.

**The Life: Has your strategy in what types of industries or categories you like to invest in changed?**

**O'Neal:** Not really. Most of my investments are things that I own. Basically, my strategy has always been it's not what you make but what you keep. If your overhead is more than what you're giving out, then something isn't right about the math.

**The Life: How about your investment strategy since you entered the NBA? Were there certain things you learned from your first investments back then that you've applied to your current strategy?**

**O'Neal:** I learned that if someone brings it to you and it's too good to be true, then it's probably no good. That's the first thing I learned. The second thing I learned is that if you believe in a product, then go with it. Don't worry about the money. The money will come if it's all good. And third, listen to the Alan Greenspans of the world and study. Follow the strengths.

I was one of the initial investors in Starbucks when they needed some money. I was one of the initial investors in Google, I was one of the initial investors in Vitamin Water. So, I've done pretty well for myself.

**The Life: Have you advised NBA players or other athletes on investments? Do they come to you for advice?**

**O'Neal:** No, they don't. Everyone has their own strategy. My first strategy was how do I get some money coming back to me after I retire, if everything goes wrong. Let's say I made \$100 million in investments, how do I still get money? The first thing I got were some annuities. That was the first thing I did. The second thing I did was following the Alan Greenspans and Steve Jobses of the world. So, I think if you use those two things, you'll be good, especially athletes. We spend a lot of money.

**The Life: You think NBA players are prepared for the lockout, that they'll start feeling heat once they miss some paychecks?**

**O'Neal:** Some say they will. But you never know unless you're in their shoes.

**The Life: With your role on Inside the NBA, are you going to try to get Barkley to try Soupman on-air.**

**O'Neal:** Of course I will.

**The Life: Will he come to you for it?**

**O'Neal:** No, I'm just going to give it to him.

**The Life: On-air?**

**O'Neal:** On-air, homeboy marketing, baby. Thirty million people watch that program. I know exactly what I'm doing.

**The Life: Is there anything about Original Soupman that you would like to add?**

**O'Neal:** They have a great soup, a great "Seinfeld" connection, a great team. The team is important to me. I've always been a great team leader and I look forward to just helping the company grow.

*Kyle Stack is a freelance writer in New York City who also contributes to ESPN The Magazine.*