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Shaquille O'Neal, who wasn't always so kind, speaks lovingly of Lakers, L.A. and the Buss family



Photos from the Lakers' annual "All-Access" event for fans, sponsored by the L.A. Sports and Entertainment Commission.



By **Mike Bresnahan** · Contact Reporter

JANUARY 25, 2016, 10:31 PM

There were no basketball games Monday at [Staples Center](#), only an event that might have patched up some differences between [Shaquille O'Neal](#) and the [Lakers](#).

If time heals all wounds, O'Neal has tried to cleanse whatever ill will he created during his eight-season Lakers run.

He sparred publicly with [Kobe Bryant](#) back then, infamously bellowed "Now you gonna pay me?" at [Jerry Buss](#) during an exhibition game, and then did the unthinkable — won a championship with Miami two years after Buss, then the Lakers' owner, traded him in 2004.

Lakers fans forgot his immense talent, his magnetic personality, his never-ending desire to make people laugh — teammates, coaches, whomever. He was mainly booed when he returned to Staples Center for games with the Heat, the villain to Bryant's hero status.

O'Neal, now 45, had some revealing things to say Monday about the Buss family. Many of his comments expressed support for [Jeanie Buss](#), the Lakers' president and also in attendance at the team's annual "All-Access" event for fans, sponsored by the L.A. Sports and Entertainment Commission.

"I love Jeanie. I love this organization. I love this city. I love this building. We had some great times here," O'Neal said. "I wish it could have played out where I played here forever, but business is business.

"Good thing about the Buss family is the day I got traded, I got a call from Jeanie and Dr. Jerry Buss [saying], 'We love you. . . . We want to do things different.' And you can only respect that.

"Jerry Buss was a genius. Whatever he saw, it always came to fruition. When he first took the chance on me and Kobe and believed in us after four years [together], brought in Phil [Jackson], bam, got it done. He let me go, Phil comes back, bam, does it again."

Jerry Buss died in 2013, leaving his majority stake in the Lakers to six of his adult children. O'Neal wasn't always so complimentary of him.

Less than a year after getting traded from the Lakers, O'Neal was happy they missed playoffs in 2005, saying "I don't regret [Buss] losing money." He also publicly derided Buss as someone who "parties with girls that are three times [younger]."

O'Neal had a softer, pro-Lakers focus to his lens Monday, well aware the team retired his jersey three years ago on a night he graciously thanked fans for their part in helping him win three championships.

This season's Lakers have staggered to a 9-37 record, on pace for their worst season ever, leading O'Neal to chide fans who continually expect success.

"It's a special year — nobody, including myself, ever thought we'd be sitting here watching Kobe Bryant's last year," O'Neal said. "It's a young team. The problem about living in this city is you guys are spoiled. You guys are used to [Magic \[Johnson\]](#), and then after [Magic](#) [it was] Kobe and myself, and then I leave and Kobe takes over.

"You guys are used to winning all the time, so when you're not winning, everybody gets a little antsy. It's definitely going to take time but you're going to have to discount this year because this year is like a celebration."

O'Neal told the crowd of about 525 that he wouldn't change a thing in his turbulent relationship with Bryant when they were teammates.

"What, three out of four isn't working out? Pretty good to me," he said, referring to their championships in four [NBA Finals](#) trips. "We just had to find certain ways to push each other and it worked."

Jeanie Buss spoke briefly Monday, her voice cracking with emotion as she related the Lakers' tradition of not retiring players' numbers until they were inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame.

"Shaq wanted to make a special exception because my father was dying and he wanted to make sure that he would be remembered as a Laker while my dad was still here," she said. "That was a really important moment for all of us, for my father. And so I appreciate that Shaq thinks of this as home."

Jerry Buss knew O'Neal's number would be retired by the Lakers but passed away two months before the actual ceremony at Staples Center. O'Neal is eligible to be inducted into the Hall of Fame this year.

Etc.

O'Neal was laughing when he said it, but seemed to be speaking honestly when talking about his college career at Louisiana State. "Yes, they paid very well. Statute of limitations is up. I can talk about it." Then he added, "Snitches get stitches . . . what can I say?" . . . Some current-day Lakers spoke at Monday's event, including an illuminating quote from rookie guard D'Angelo Russell. He was asked about his confidence level in a league where he had to defend Stephen Curry, [Russell Westbrook](#) and others. "I've still got it. I mean, they've got to guard me too," he said.

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A version of this article appeared in print on January 26, 2016, in the Sports section of the Los Angeles Times with the headline "Shaq's Lakers account is paid in full - O'Neal, who once demanded Jerry Buss' money, shows love for Jeanie, family, team and city at annual event" — Today's paper | [Subscribe](#)

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