

DIESEL POWER

Three NBA titles. Two Florida mansions. One beautiful family.
Shaquille O'Neal is a lucky bastard. And he knows it.

by **Scott Resch** photography by **Scott McDermott**

The stylish Shaquille O'Neal, photographed
at Hotel Victor, in Miami Beach, on Nov. 11, 2005.
Clothing by èlevée.

UP A PRIVATE ELEVATOR, through a semi-hidden door in the penthouse suite's master bedroom, and up two more flights of stairs, is the rooftop patio at Hotel Victor. At least on most Friday afternoons it is. But not today.

Shaquille O'Neal is in the house, and as the notorious jokester makes his way over to the wall that encloses the terrace, finding below him Ocean Drive, the turquoise waters of the Atlantic Ocean, and bronze beauties in bikini tops, this spot immediately transforms into something else:

A stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears!" O'Neal bellows, borrowing a line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. "It's me – The King of Miami!"

Waves and whistles ensue, and the man who stands 7'1" and weighs 330 pounds puts on a grin as wide as his wingspan.

Call him what you want – Big Daddy, Diesel, and Superman are just a few of his more common nicknames – Shaquille O'Neal lives for moments like this. The chance to clown around, say something goofy, act like a little kid.

He does it all the time. With his Heat teammates. With his five kids. His wife. Even perfect strangers.

"Once I put super glue on the toilet seat at a rest stop," he says, chuckling at the memory. "Some dude went in right

behind me. This may sound cruel, but I didn't stick around."

Spend any amount of time with O'Neal and it's impossible to walk away believing there's a mean bone in his body. He talks, but he also listens. And he does so with the kind of attentive eyes your best friend has. He's not a politician, yet he acts as if he's running for office.

Even more profound is his outright love for Miami, the city he's called home since the Heat acquired him in a trade with the Lakers last year. To prove it, he did in August what few athletes ever do in this day and age: accept a lower annual salary than he was due so the team could pursue other players and improve its title hopes.

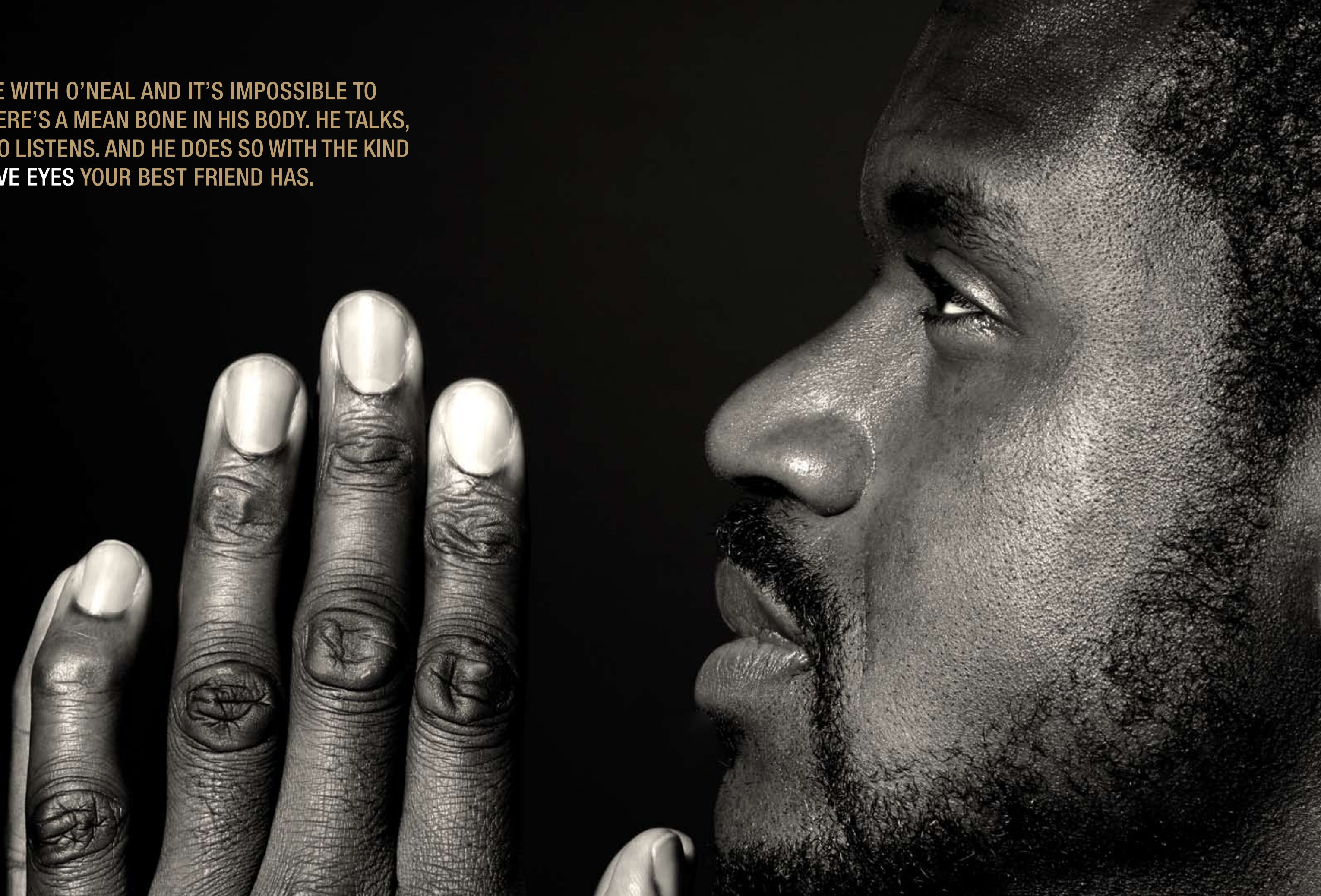
Unselfish? Sure. Completely? Let's not get carried away. Even after the contract restructure, he's still the highest paid player (\$20 million per year) in the NBA. And it's not like he has to go to work wearing a scarf and Eskimo boots.

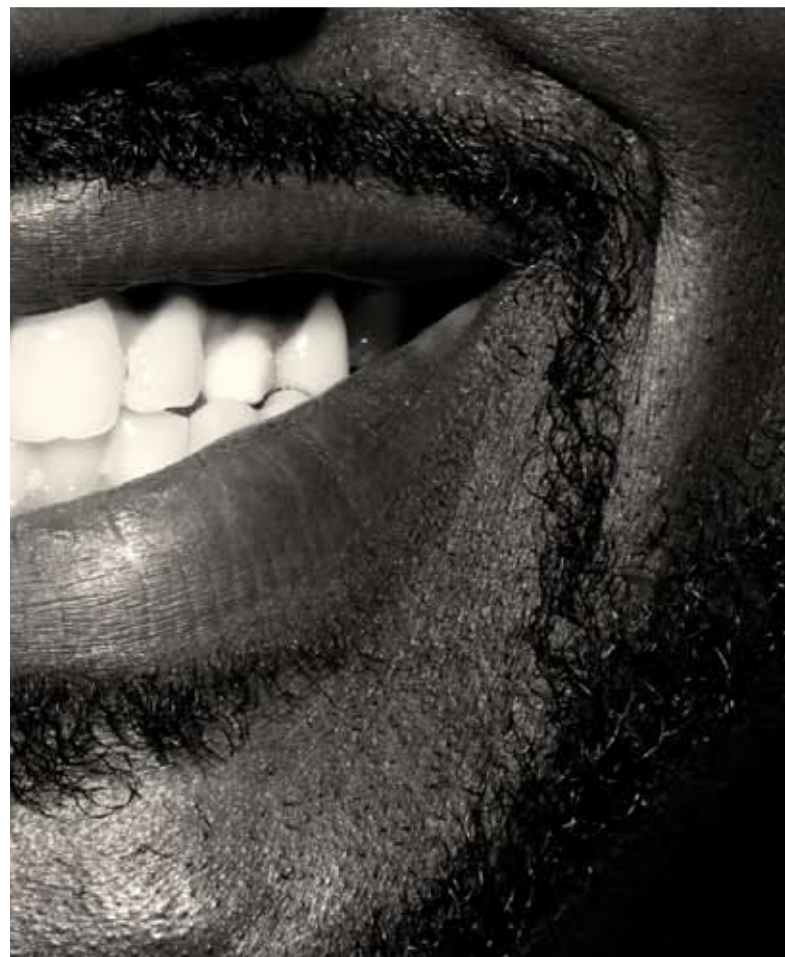
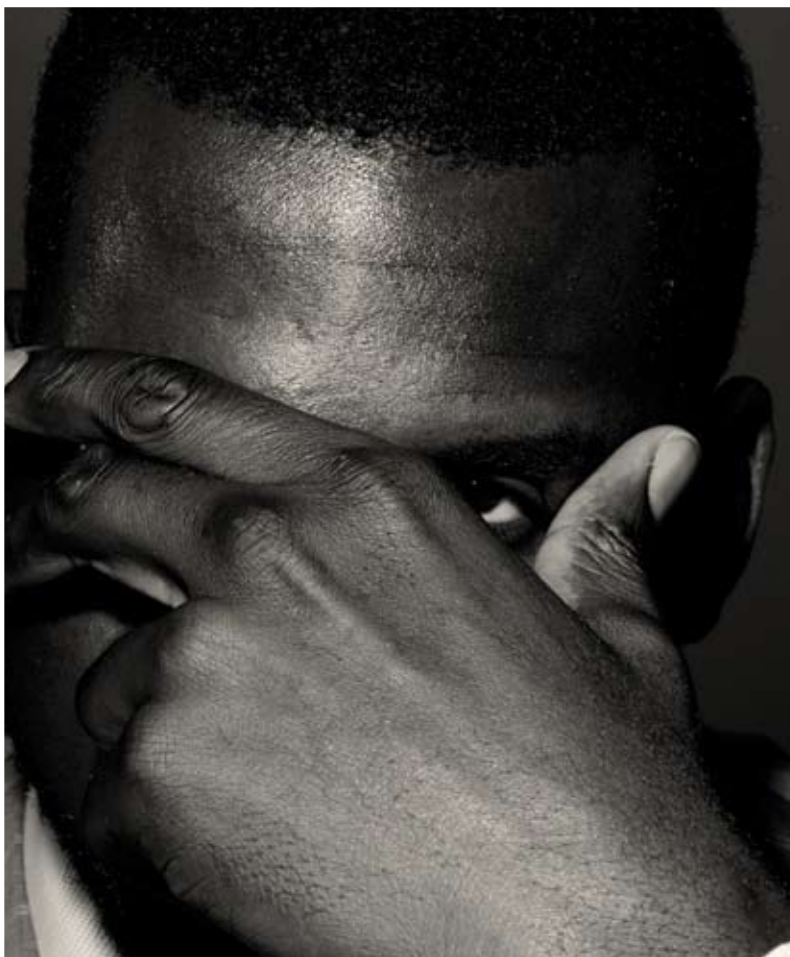
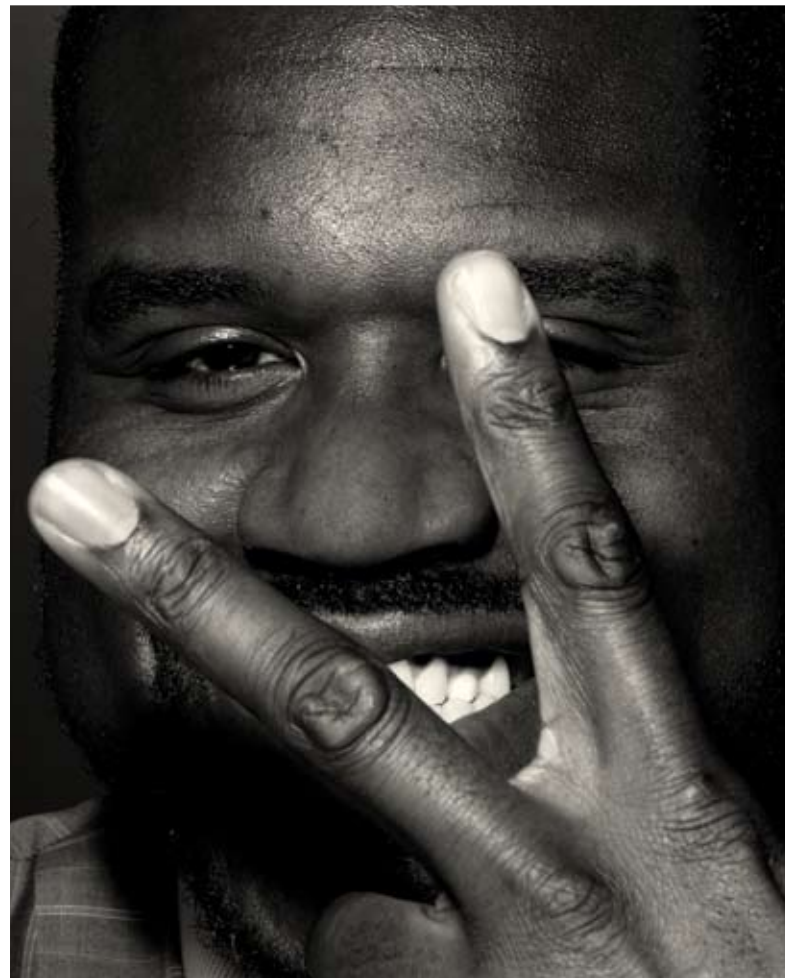
"You can't beat it down here," O'Neal says, a warm breeze causing his *èlevée* suit jacket to flap at the waist. "I've always said: 'Trade me to the cold, and I'll retire.'"

Truth is, O'Neal isn't far from hanging up his size 23



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EEEs anyway. At 33 and in his 13th professional season, he is moving into the twilight of a career that has included three league championships, three Finals MVP awards, and nine All-Star Game selections.

But basketball isn't the only thing that makes him tick. He gets a rush out of helping people, too. In 2005 alone, he introduced a line of affordable athletic shoes, organized and participated in a relief effort for victims of Hurricane Katrina, and paid for the funeral of legendary center George Mikan.

And John Stockton is the king of assists?

O'Neal's biggest contributions may come when he's in a police uniform. The son of an Air Force sergeant and the nephew of a cop, he plans to become a county sheriff one day.

His duties have already started.

In the offseason, he worked for the Miami Beach Police Department and helped in the arrest of a man accused of assaulting a gay couple. He has also received special training in Internet crime investigation – a job he says can be both satisfying and nauseating.

"I like the catching (criminals) part," he says. "But I don't like the looking at video tape of guys doing little girls. That's some sick shit."

SHAQUILLE O'NEAL IS THINKING ABOUT NAMING his next child Shaquille O'Neal.



"I'VE GOT THE FAIRYTALE LIFE. THE PERFECT JOB, THE BIG HOUSE, THE PRETTY WIFE AND KIDS. I'M ONE LUCKY BASTARD."

"Would my kids be pissed?" he asks during a break in the photo shoot.

"Probably," I say. "Especially if you were to have another one. Then you can't say you saved it for last."

"That's true," O'Neal says. He may live in a 20,000-square-foot mansion on Biscayne Bay and own a fleet of 12 exotic automobiles, but there's nothing he values more than his family, which consists of sons Myles, Shareef, and Shaqir, daughters Taahirah and Amirah, and wife Shaunie.

O'Neal is an enforcer of a different kind at home. He doesn't promote fighting amongst his boys, but he is definitely hands-off, often allowing them to sort out their own arguments.

"My kids fight every day," he says. "No gloves; just fists. The little one (Shaqir, 2) is the toughest."

Shaqir may have new competition soon; Shaunie is

expecting to give birth again in May. For the O'Neals, it will be their fourth child together (each has one from a previous relationship). The two have been married for three years, but have known each other much longer.

"I was with my wife for eight years before I knew she wanted to get married," O'Neal says. "She got me because she was different, she was smart. She didn't go for any of my bullshit lines."

The couple share a strong mutual respect that has grown deep since their meeting in a restaurant years ago. But when it came time to take a short vacation in August, it was Shaunie who chose the destination, much to Shaquille's chagrin.

"Italy," he says, wistfully shaking his head.

"What, didn't you like it?" I ask.

"She wanted a private jet," he says. "Three days. \$500,000. That ain't my thing."



“Spending that kind of money, you mean?”

“All of it. Get me a big airplane, a hotel room in a city, and I’m happy. Simple dude, man.”

“MAKE SURE MY SHIT ISN’T BUNCHED UP,” Shaq says, referring to the front of his pinstripe gray vest, which the stylist is trying to straighten out for the day’s last series of photos.

He’s being particular because he cares a lot about his appearance these days, especially when he visits school children to talk about law enforcement. He wouldn’t even let the shoot begin until he was comfortable with the way his tie looked.

“Not fat enough,” he said, dead serious.

Tonight he’ll be looking good, too. Starting at 8 o’clock, he and Shaunie will be hosting a party in the backyard of their eight-bedroom, 10-bathroom home on the exclusive Star Island, where residents include singer Gloria Estefan and rapper Sean “Diddy” Combs. It’s not the ridiculously large 72,000-square-foot estate he still owns and occasionally uses to “wind down” in Orlando. “But it’ll do just fine,” he says.

Five hundred guests are expected, and if they’ve all shown, it’s difficult to tell – there’s that much acreage for revelers to roam.

Celebrities dance and mingle everywhere. Hall of Famer Dominique Wilkins. Marlins slugger Miguel Cabrera. Condo mogul Jorge Perez. Heat president Pat Riley. Even

the former owners of the mansion – supermodel Elsa Benitez and husband Rony Seikaly – show up.

There’s also the entire Heat roster of players, including two of his closest friends, third-year phenom Dwyane Wade and veteran Gary Payton.

Payton, who played with O’Neal in L.A. as well and is no less of a prankster than his buddy, says the two became good buddies the moment they stepped foot in the same locker room.

“We just clicked,” Payton says. “We’ve got the same personality, I guess. He hasn’t even really tried to [prank] me because we’re so close.

“We’ve even got a lot of the same toys. He got one of them Segways, and when I saw it I went out and got three of them.”

Later, after a pair of watches are auctioned off (for charity, of course), Ja Rule appears. But not just to say hello. He performs for half an hour before hopping offstage and giving the big man a hug.

This is what it’s like to be so respected, to be a man of all people, to be Shaquille O’Neal. If Big Daddy throws it, the stars will come out. And even The King of Miami knows that’s pretty damn cool.

“I’ve got the perfect fairytale life,” he says. “The perfect job, the big house(s), the pretty wife, the pretty kids. What can I say? I’m one lucky bastard.”

That’s no joke. ❧❧