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Shaq is out: Shaquille O'Neal wants new nickname for Celtics move

Shaquille O'Neal, who recently signed with the Boston Celtics, appealed to his new fans for a new nickname. One linguist says that sports nicknames are thriving thanks to heavy sports media coverage.

In this Oct. 27, 2009 file photo, Cleveland Cavaliers' Shaquille O'Neal (33) tries to pass around Boston Celtics' Kevin Garnett during an NBA basketball game in Cleveland. O'Neal signed with the Celtics this week, sparking talk over what his new nickname might be.

Tony Dejak/AP/File

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By *Matt Rocheleau*, Contributor / August 6, 2010

Boston

Since the mid-week announcement of Shaquille O'Neal's signing with the Celtics, Boston fans have posed a slew of new nicknames they hope will be as memorable as some of the monikers the 18-year veteran NBA center has already accrued.

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While Mr. O'Neal, who may become Boston's new "Green Monster," may boast more nicknames than most athletes, the designations are a tradition in the sports world.

O'Neal is a one-man nickname machine, with double-digits in whimsical monikers. But some think that "Shaq" might be an anomaly in the sports nickname cottage industry and that the practice of nicknaming athletes might be on the wane.

Some argue that nicknames are less prevalent now than in prior decades because "athletes follow

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money instead of staying with one team," Robert Kennedy, a linguist at the University of California, Santa Barbara who has closely studied nicknames in sports, wrote in an e-mail.

"But I have not been convinced that there are fewer nicknames, and I could counter-argue that player movement brings more players in contact with more press pools, creating more opportunities for nicknames for each individual," Mr. Kennedy wrote.

Kennedy believes the question deserves more scientific scrutiny, but he is inclined to think nicknames have increased recently. "I think there is a lot more written and spoken about any given game, so I would suspect there are more [nicknames] now," he added. "I think there is also a growing consciousness of nicknames, which may drive our desire to continue to come up with new ones."

Kennedy divides sports nicknames into two types – those that are longer, descriptive phrases, or phrasal nicknames (e.g. "Sultan of Swat" for George Herman Ruth) and those that are shorter, one- to two-syllable nicknames ("Babe," for example, also for the aforementioned Mr. Ruth).

"I've come across numerous editorials claiming basically 'nicknames aren't as creative as they used to be' but such arguments unfairly compare old phrasal nicknames with contemporary short forms," Kennedy wrote.

The two nicknames types have distinct functions and origins. Phrasal nicknames are typically coined by print or broadcast journalists to make their story-telling more engaging and interesting for their audience, according to Kennedy. Short-form nicknames are usually created by friends or teammates as an abbreviated manner of addressing someone they know.

"For example you might write a story about 'The Big Cactus' but if you were trying to get his attention across a crowded room you wouldn't use that, you'd yell 'Shaq!,'" Kennedy added.

Kennedy believes it is unusual for athletes to nickname themselves, which is perhaps why Shaq asked requested that his new neighbors in Beantown craft one.

"Hello green town. ok what u got 4 nicknames? make um good," Shaq wrote in a Twitter post Wednesday night.

"I would bet the 'Big Shamrock' would come out at some point," wrote Kennedy.

With nearly 6,000 votes in as of Friday morning, "The Big Shamrock" was second in an online Boston.com poll trailing "Green Monster."

All sports equally lend themselves to short-form nicknames, but there are likely fewer phrasal nicknames used in football because of the sport's larger rosters, Kennedy said. This is why names describing entire defensive lines as opposed to individual nicknames for each lineman, for example, are used.

So, which nickname is a sport nickname expert's all-time favorite?

"I'm a hockey fan, so my favorites come from that sport. I like Pocket Rocket for Henri Richard and I like the Chico story, too ('Chico' for Glenn Resch, so named because he looked like [comedian] Freddy Prinze [who starred in the 1970s sitcom 'Chico and the Man']),," Kennedy wrote. "But I got into this by being interested in short-form nicknames, so I actually have a soft spot for Alfie (for [Daniel] Alfredsson), Spets (for [Jason] Spezza), and Nabby (for [Evgeni] Nabokov)."

[Editor's note: *The original headline of this article incorrectly asserted that Robert Kennedy credited the Internet for increased incidence of sports nicknames. Mr. Kennedy did credit wider*

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interest in sports, but he did not specifically mention the Internet.]

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