

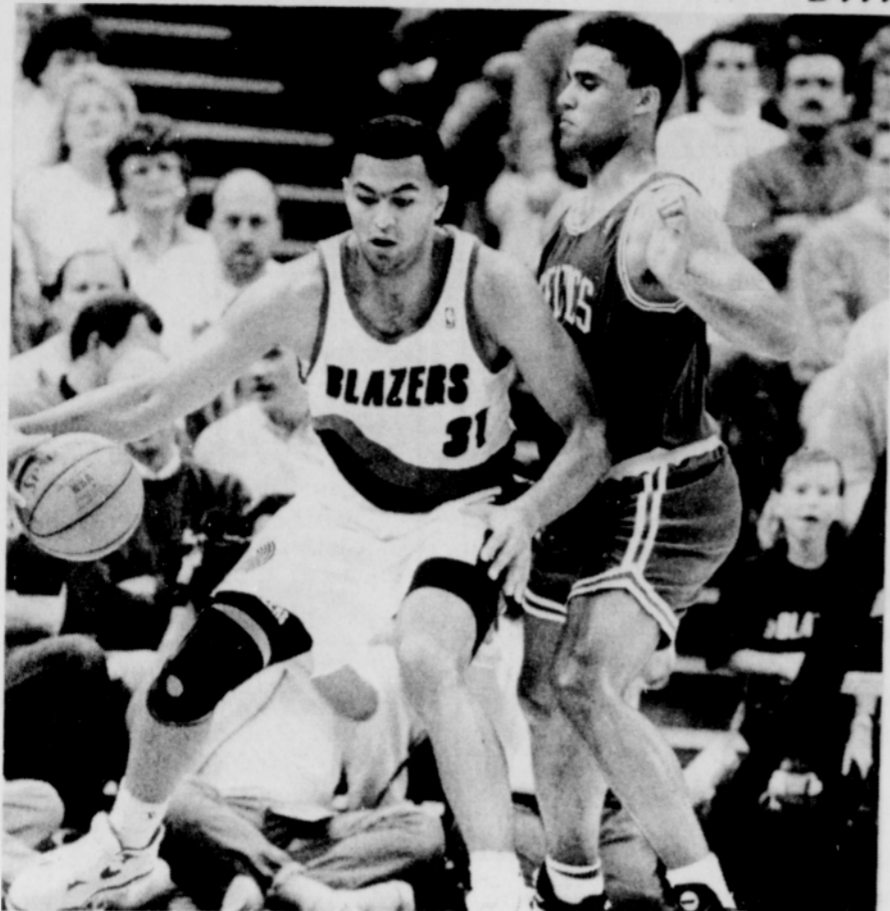
SPORTS

When Alaa Gives An Autograph, Fans Get More Than A Signature

Bill Barber

Alaa Abdelnaby has as many facets to his personality as a fine cut diamond. The aggressive quickness and controlled finesse most of the fans admire on the basketball court is easily recognizable. Then there is that one dimple smile that disarms you. Behind the smile, there is a glint in his eyes... A glint that flashes like a neon billboard to the "street-wise" people who are put on guard. This man is a practical joker. If you didn't see the story on television last Sunday that involved Alaa and Danny Ainge trying to get an unsuspecting Jerome Kersey to chip in on a half-dead race horse, ask a friend to tell you about it. "Ainge is the only Trail Blazer who will challenge me as a practical joker." Every championship team has one player who has the ability to keep his teammates loose while maintaining their focus.

"It's not just because of talent that I'm here (in the NBA) and other guys aren't. Some guys didn't do the school work. Some of the guys I played with in AAU ball were great players... better than I was at the time...but they didn't have the grades, so nobody recruited them. Some of them didn't even finish high school. I'm lucky I learned about the importance of academics before the recruiters came around. I had four or five good years under my belt by then. A lot of the guys I played with in AAU ball," Abdelnaby continued, "are stuck in minimum wage jobs and still playing on the weekends. I'm not putting them down, but when you compare what could have been to what it is, and then say 'Just because I didn't go to class,



and didn't study'... those are poor reasons to have to explain to yourself when you don't have things. When you're 40 years old and you have to say to your kids, 'I've got to teach you what I did wrong,' you've got to live up to that and say, 'The reason I'm not successful is I didn't go to class or I dropped out,'" Abdelnaby instructed. "However you can get it across to kids, you've got to let them know that at their level, academics are just as important as sports right now. Even if you are a

great player and you make the NBA, you still have to have something to do after you retire."

When it comes to dating and "hanging out", there were times when Alaa couldn't be normal. "I couldn't be who I wanted to be. My mom always told me, 'To succeed you have to make sacrifices... You have to give up something you appreciate so that when you get something else, you're worthy of receiving it.' When you're given something after you've earned it,

is much sweeter than when it's just handed to you. The playing time I'm getting now is much sweeter than if I had just walked in here and started for the Trail Blazers. I really worked hard all season long and all summer long, now it's paying off for me. I savor every minute I get on the court."

"The thing I don't like about my job is that I don't always get looked at as a normal person. After practice I take a shower, go to the cleaners and run errands, just like everyone else," Abdelnaby explained. "Yet people's perspective of pro basketball players is that at game time we put on our uniforms and after the game we are put in this little box and nobody sees us until the next game. That's not it at all. We go to restaurants, we go shopping just like everyone else. We're normal." Abdelnaby likes music; jazz, rap, R & B, pop, all kinds of music. He and Cliff have even talked about opening a night club. Night clubs are an occasional outlet because, "My job has me around a lot of people, but not really with people." Celebrity status has its price to pay. "I like fitting in, kind of incognito...I don't go out with a trench coat and dark glasses, I just like blending in. That is one thing I like about going home. I live just across the river from New York City. In New York, I'm one of millions and it's nice to be anonymous once in a while."

He is also a college graduate of highly respected and academically tough Duke University. He is a thinker. He will even admit to being too ana-

lytical at times. Are people talking to him because of what he does for a living, or because they want to find out more about him as a person? Abdelnaby explains, "Sometimes it's a shame that when someone walks away after a short awkward conversation, I wish I could call them back and we could talk person-to-person. I'm not unapproachable, and I don't have my head in the clouds. I enjoy people."

Being single, its no doubt, he has a lot ladies who want to talk to him. What kind of women does he like? "I like someone who is as similar to me as possible." (Okay ladies, if you're not a 6'10", 240lb, Egyptian intellectual with a great sense of humor, who can thunder to the hoop with the speed and velocity of a run-away freight train, don't be discouraged.) "Having friends who have different interests is fine, but in a girlfriend that you're going to be spending a lot of time with, I'd like to find someone I have a lot in common with. One thing is height; I definitely look at tall girls more favorably. For a person my height, it's easier when she doesn't get a stiff neck from looking up at me. That doesn't mean I haven't dated shorter women or that I wouldn't in the future."

Dating someone your own height in high school is often a problem for anyone who is 6'1" as a freshman in Bloomfield, New Jersey. When you grow 6" over the summer, you get a sense of how well you'll be able to compromise your dating choices in the future. Most kids would be trip-

ping all over themselves after such a rapid growth spurt. Abdelnaby had a secret formula for maintaining his coordination. "Being from Egypt, I played soccer until I was a sophomore in high school. It really helped with my foot speed, lateral movement, and balance." Patrick Ewing and Akeem Olajuwon both played soccer growing up. Also, being from Egypt, Alaa may be the only Portland Trail Blazer in the Olympics in 1992.

"I want to be an 'Oregonian,'" Alaa told me. "I live here and I enjoy it in Oregon. The biggest asset this place has is its people. The people out here have given me nothing but their best, and I want to give them back nothing but my best. I'm lucky to be one of only 300 people who do this for a living. Some people out there are hurt, or on drugs, or having bad luck or out of work. I'm thankful, and I'm so lucky to be where I am."

Finally, we talked a little about autograph seekers. Abdelnaby had an insightful observation that most fans might find interesting. "I don't mind signing autographs, but if time permits I'd rather talk to a fan and get to know a little about them as a person. Maybe they think they shouldn't 'bother' us. No, we're human just like them, we're just working when they're off work. When someone just shoves a pen and paper under your nose and then runs off it's kind of like, you give a little piece of yourself to them, and then they go without leaving any of themselves behind."

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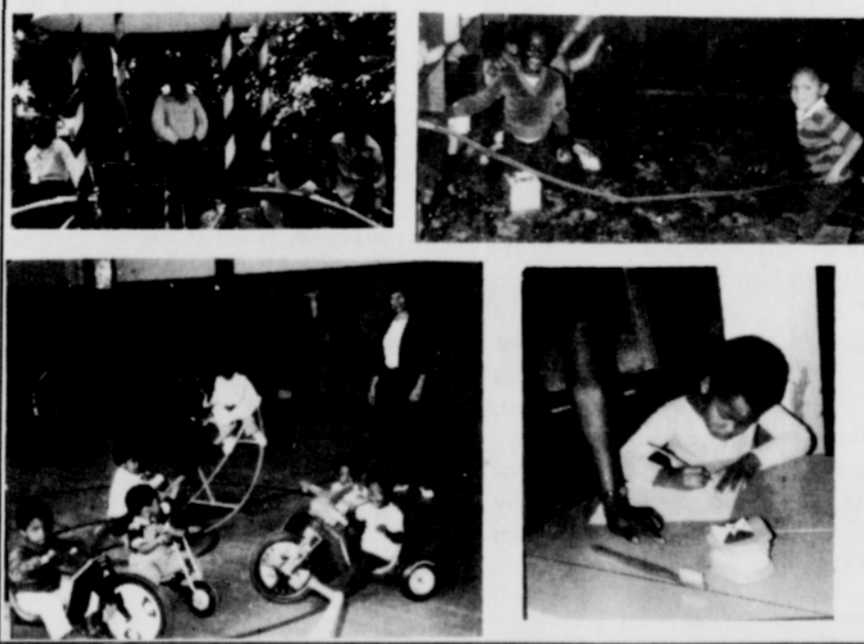
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