

RISING SUN

Amare Stoudemire of the Phoenix Suns is fierce, fearless, and the NBA's next big star

Let's get one thing straight: Amare Stoudemire is not afraid of anyone or anything. Ask the Phoenix Suns' 6' 10", 245-pound forward to guard 7' 1", 300-pound center Shaquille O'Neal of the Los Angeles Lakers, and he'll do it — no questions asked. Feed him the ball in the post, and he'll dunk on anybody — with pleasure. Burden him with a childhood full of tragedy and turmoil, and he'll make it his mission to come out on top.

Stoudemire, age 20, lives up to his nickname, STAT, which stands for "Standing Tall and Talented." But it turns out he *is* afraid of one thing: "I fear snakes," he

Big shot

by Sachin Shenolikar

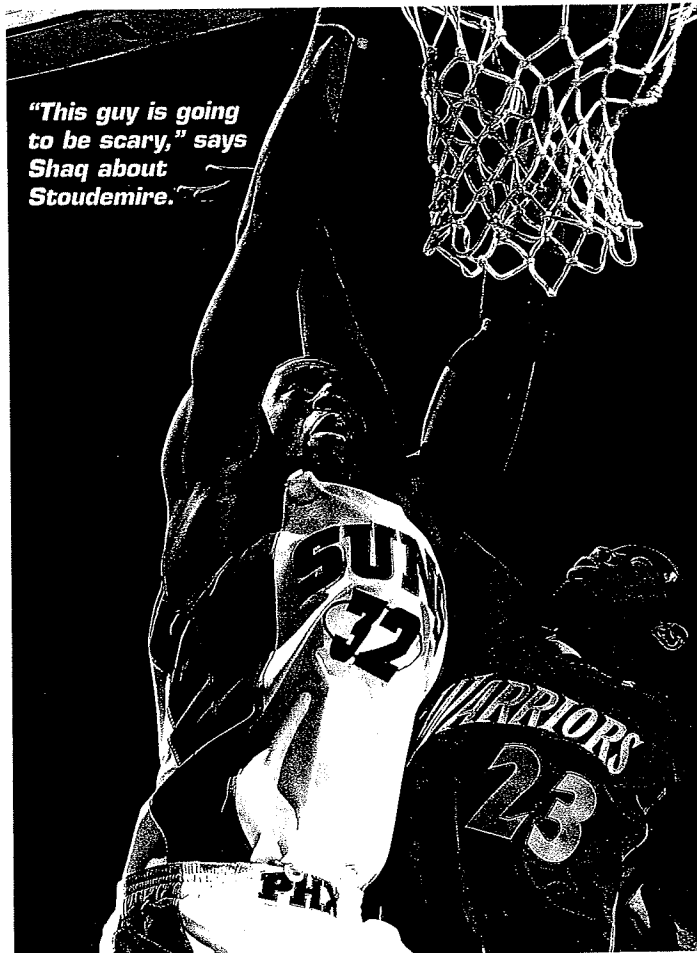
says with a smile. "I don't know why. I'm just scared of those things, man."

Slimy serpents may make Stoudemire squirm, but his fearless play as a rookie has earned him admirers from around the league. Forward Dirk Nowitzki of the Dallas Mavericks called Stoudemire "awesome." Shaq made the following proclamation during the All-Star break in 2002-03: "I have seen the future of the NBA, and his name is Amare Stoudemire." Stoudemire backed up Shaq's monster praise by becoming the first straight-from-high-school player to win the Rookie of the Year award last season. His 13.5 points and 8.8 boards per game were better than any of the 19 straight-from-high-school rookies in NBA history.

Dominating Dunker

"What's the most impressive thing you've seen Amare Stoudemire do?" Sun point guard Stephon Marbury was asked last season. Marbury's eyes widened as he answered: "I saw him split two defenders standing side by side. He did a spin move through both of them and did a one-hand tomahawk dunk."

Stoudemire puts the power in power forward. The dunks — especially the facials, which Stoudemire calls his "pride and joy" — leave arenas buzzing and mouths gaping in awe. STAT can snatch the ball in the paint, reach back over his head with his right



arm, and pause in mid-air before striking down on the basket — and on anyone unlucky enough to be in his way. Says Sun forward Shawn Marion: "He tries to dunk *every* time he gets the ball."

Ask Stoudemire to pick his favorite dunk of 2002-03, and, well, he can't. "Either the one over [Golden State Warrior forward] Troy Murphy's back or the one over [then Los Angeles Clipper center] Michael Olowokandi," he says. "Or the one when it was a two-on-one

when Amare was 12. His mother, Carrie, was in and out of prison on various charges, including theft. His older brother, Hazell, now 26, was sent to jail in 1999 for drug dealing. During those tough times, Stoudemire promised himself that he would make it to the NBA. "[The hard times] motivated me because I wanted to do something to put my family in a better situation," he says. "Only the strong survive, man."

With his mom away, Stoudemire

was left to fend for himself. Although he had some help from adults, such as a summer-league coach, STAT says he

and I took off from around the free-throw line." With choices like those, you can't blame STAT for his indecision.

Growing Pains

Stoudemire has had pro hoops on his mind since he was 8 years old. "I used to get in trouble because I used to write *NBA* in crayon on my mom's wall," he recalls.

Growing up, he played pickup basketball at the local playground. He also played wide receiver on a Pop Warner football team. The summer after eighth grade, he grew four inches, to 6' 7". His height was catching up to his NBA-sized dream.

Stoudemire's childhood was rough. His dad, Hazell, Sr., died

"Only the strong survive, man,"

says Stoudemire.

called his own shots. He attended six different high schools across Florida and North Carolina. Stoudemire says he kept switching schools to try and find the best path to the pros. When his mom was out of prison, he lived with her. At other times, Stoudemire lived with one of his coaches. At one point, he even hired a public relations person to get himself on the radar screen of NBA scouts.

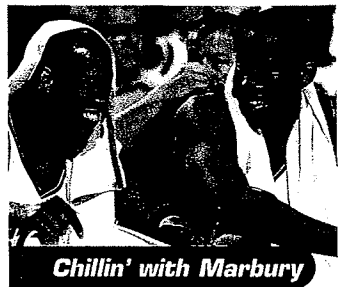
Stoudemire did not play basketball at all his junior year. He had transferred from Mount Zion Academy, in Durham, North Carolina, to West Orange (Florida) High School between his sophomore and junior years. His grades on his transcripts from Mount Zion were poor, making him academically ineligible to play. Stoudemire claims Mount Zion lowered his grades because it didn't want him to transfer. Officials at the school would not comment on this charge.

While sitting out, he worked on his game at the local YMCA. "I love it when there's no one in the gym, because it's just me against 'Michael Jordan,'" he says.

Stoudemire attended summer school at West Orange between his sophomore and junior years to fulfill the academic requirements he needed to play. He finally became eligible as a senior at Cypress Creek High School, in Orlando, Florida. Stoudemire averaged 29.1 points, 15 rebounds, and 6.1 blocks per game. He was a McDonald's All-America and won Florida's Mr. Basketball award.

Draft Steal

Stoudemire had gaudy stats for a high school player, but some NBA scouts felt his game was too raw to

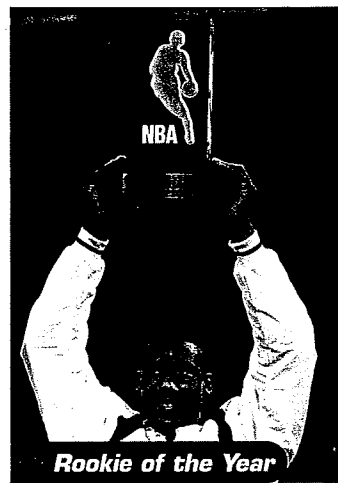


Chillin' with Marbury

BARRY COSSAGNA/GETTY IMAGES (2)



Phoenix's favorite Sun












Rookie of the Year

ROY DABENHARF PHOTO

make an immediate impact in the NBA. Because he had changed schools so often, Stoudemire played just two full seasons of high school ball and had little formal coaching. "Stoudemire is light years away [from being a successful pro]," one NBA scout told S.I. For Kids before the 2002 draft. "He's not ready to make a contribution."

Stoudemire didn't care what scouts thought. "When I look for advice, I look inside myself," he says. "I figured it out on my own." Stoudemire passed up a scholarship to the University

STOudemIRE'S FAVORITE STUFF

Sport to Watch and Play (other than basketball)	Football 
TV Show	NBA Inside Stuff 
Movie	Friday
Actor	Samuel L. Jackson
Musical Artist	Tupac Shakur 
Food	Seafood Alfredo 
Cartoon Character	The Brain, of Pinky and the Brain 
Athlete	Charles Barkley 
Vacation Spot	Orlando, Florida
Video Game	NBA Live 2004
Car	BMW 
Animal	Pit bull puppy 
Hobby	Golf 

ALL THE STUFF: COURTESY OF EA SPORTS; SHAKUR BY AP PHOTO; BARKLEY BY JOHN W. MOON/OUTSIDE SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; PIT BULL BY PAT DOTLE/OUTSIDE SPORTS; BMW COURTESY OF BMW

of Memphis and entered the 2002 draft.

The Suns loved Stoudemire's athleticism and had done a thorough background check on him before the draft. "Our point of view was, look at all the things that are going on around him and there's no red flags on him," says Sun assistant general manager Mark West. "That, to me, is remarkable." Phoenix was delighted when it got Stoudemire with the ninth overall pick. He was the only high school player taken in the draft.

The Suns knew they had landed

a special player, but even they didn't know Stoudemire would turn out to be so good, so soon. "I'd heard rumors of him and saw highlights of him dunking [in high school]," says Shawn Marion. "But I wanted to see what he could do in person. When I played with him, I was, like, 'Oh, my gosh,' it was crazy 'cause his upside is tremendous."

Playing Like a Veteran

The Suns were 36-46 in 2001-02 and were not expected to make the playoffs in 2002-03. They gave Stoudemire minutes from Day 1 and hoped for the best.

Stoudemire didn't play like a scared rookie. In a game against the Washington Wizards, he asked Michael Jordan, "What's the key to success for me?" Jordan's response: "You're doing pretty good so far. Seems like you have it."

In another game, Paul Pierce of the Boston Celtics drove through the lane. Stoudemire knocked the swingman to the ground. Pierce chipped two of his teeth in the fall. In Stoudemire the Suns had the inside presence they had lacked the season before, and he helped them match up against teams in the big-man-stacked Western Conference.

Phoenix finished 44-38 and took the San Antonio Spurs to six games in the first round of the playoffs. Stoudemire averaged 14.2 points and 7.8 rebounds per game in the post-season. "You say straight from high school, but he's got a man's body," says Marion. "He's going in there and going straight at people's chests."

Says Dirk Nowitzki: "He's stronger than everyone else. He's got a better body than almost every power forward in the league."

Stoudemire's chiseled frame played a large factor in his success, but so did his quickness and 38-inch vertical leap. Sun assistant general manager Mark West and assistant coach Marc Iavaroni also cite his



Stoudemire had a career-high six blocks against the Denver Nuggets in 2002-03.

ERIC GRAY/AP

even-keel personality, unrelenting drive, and pinpoint focus. "He picks up on things extremely fast, both on and off the court," says West.

Yes to Finesse

Stoudemire's success has proved that a straight-from-high-school baller can be a major factor in the league in his first season. It fueled the hype around phenom LeBron James and the high school class of 2003. The result: In the 2003 NBA Draft, James was taken Number 1 and four other high schoolers were

that he bought for her.

STAT had minor surgery on a toe injury that had bothered him all last season. He took a month off to rest and heal, then spent the rest of the summer working on his jump shot, ball handling, and defense.

Next on Stoudemire's agenda: Showing the world there's more to his game than pure power. "I got finesse," says Stoudemire. "It's just that my power's so dominant, I don't use the finesse that much. Opponents are gonna see it all this year."

Now there's a scary thought. ●

also chosen. "I think [my play] helped LeBron and those guys," Stoudemire says.

Stoudemire's family life is also starting to settle down. His mother is out of prison and lives in the house in Phoenix, Arizona,

**POSTER
INSIDE!**

STOUEMIRE'S Stats

Season	G	Pts	Scoring Avg	FG Pct.	FT Pct.	RPG	APG	BPG
2002-03	82	1,106	13.5	.472	.661	8.8	1.0	1.06

G: Games; Pts: Points; Avg: Average; FG Pct.: Field-goal percentage; FT Pct.: Free-throw Percentage; RPG: Rebounds Per Game; APG: Assists Per Game; BPG: Blocks Per Game

RISING SUN

1. WHAT ANIMAL DOES AMARE FEAR?
2. HOW MANY POINTS DID AMARE AVERAGE HIS FIRST SEASON?
3. HOW TALL WAS AMARE WHEN IN THE 8TH GRADE?
4. HOW OLD WAS AMARE WHEN HIS FATHER DIED?
5. WHICH HIGH SCHOOL DID AMARE GRADUATE FROM?
6. AMARE'S FAVORITE CAR IS?
7. IN PLAYOFF VS. SAN ANTONIO HOW MANY POINTS DID AMARE AVERAGE?
8. HOW MANY POINTS DID HE SCORE IN THE 2002-03 SEASON?
9. AMARE WON THE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR AWARD. TRUE OR FALSE?
10. WHAT IS AMARE'S NICKNAME?