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## How a Torrance basketball star scored as Laker Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in HBO's 'Winning Time'

Stuart Miller : 8-10 minutes : 3/3/2022

Since the Magic Johnson era, the Los Angeles Lakers have been inseparable from Hollywood. So it's only fitting that HBO's new series "Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty," which premieres on March 6th, put together a high-profile roster that includes executive producer Adam McKay and a cast that includes John C. Reilly (Jerry Buss), Sally Field (Jessie Buss), Adrien Brody (Pat Riley), Tracy Letts (Jack McKinney), Jason Segal (Paul Westhead), Jason Clarke (Jerry West), Wood Harris (Spencer Haywood) Gaby Hoffman (Claire Rothman) and Michael Chiklis (Red Auerbach).

But the heavily stylized and wildly entertaining adaptation of Jeff Pearlman's book, "Showtime" – like the Lakers themselves – can only go so far as Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar can take them. Those two are portrayed by unknowns, Quincy Isaiah, who plays Johnson, and Solomon Hughes, who makes his debut as his one-time idol Abdul-Jabbar. (He devoured Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography when he was growing up.)



Solomon Hughes plays Lakers legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in HBO's "Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty," which premieres on March 6th, 2022. Here he recreates Abdul-Jabbar's appearance in the film "Airplane!" (Courtesy of HBO)

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Solomon Hughes plays Lakers legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in HBO's "Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty," which premieres on March 6th, 2022. Here he recreates Abdul-Jabbar's appearance in the film "Airplane!" (Courtesy of HBO)

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But while Hughes is a rookie actor at age 43, he's the only one of the major characters with legitimate basketball chops, starting with his days as a star at Bishop Montgomery High School in Torrance. (His team got torched by Jason Segal's high school team — which also featured future NBA players Jason and Jarron Collins — but Hughes says Segal didn't remember playing him. "Of course," I said, "We were just one of the many teams you bulldozed," Hughes recalls telling his castmate.)

Hughes was then starting center at the University of California, Berkeley and played professionally in second-tier leagues like the USBL and Mexico's pro league. He even joined the Harlem Globetrotters.

Still, Hughes, who found out about the auditions from a college teammate, “had not played ball in a long time and was grateful that basketball wasn’t part of the auditions.”

It’s the other half of his background that made Hughes especially suited to capturing the gravitas and intellectual intensity of Abdul-Jabbar. Hughes, whose father once chaired the Sociology Department at Cal State Fullerton, is a more legitimate owner of the title Doctor than Julius “Dr. J” Erving, who appears in the series as one of the Lakers’ key rivals. After getting a master’s at Berkeley, Hughes earned a Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Georgia.

Hughes has been Assistant Director of the EDGE Doctoral Fellowship Program (Enhancing Diversity in Graduation Education) at Stanford and most recently was a visiting lecturer at Duke University’s Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity.

Hughes spoke by video recently about rooting for the Lakers, studying Abdul-Jabbar’s personal story and, of course, the Laker legend’s famed skyhook. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q. Growing up in the area, were you a Laker fan and did you dream of playing for them?**

I was a spoiled Southern California kid who grew up knowing nothing but Lakers’ excellence. I did dream of playing for them. I had a tryout with the Kings and a pre-draft tryout with the Lakers. I did miserably, but at the very least I got into the facility.

The reality is I liked basketball; I didn’t love it the way the show captures the intensity of the people who deeply love this game. When my hoop dreams ended three or four years after college, I just pivoted back to education. I knew that was the space I wanted to work in.

**Q. There aren’t many actors with your experience – not just playing basketball at those levels but earning a Ph.D. and working in higher education on issues of diversity and equity. How did the latter help you with this role?**

It was helpful coming from a background where the emphasis is on digging deeply around issues that are important to our society, especially issues of race; it felt like a nice on-ramp to building a portrayal of this great man.

**Q. Did you meet with Abdul-Jabbar?**

I tried to reach out to his people but they weren’t interested, and I’m fine with that. I can only imagine what it would be like to have somebody portraying you – there are billboards for the show around the city now and I can only imagine what he would think as he drives by.

**Q. You’d read his autobiography “Giant Steps” and were a fan of his but what other research did you do?**

He’s a fascinating individual and it was fun to dig into the research. I grew up a fan but it was great to go deeper – to read the things he wrote about himself and that people wrote about him and about the ecosystems that cultivated him: Harlem, Los Angeles, Milwaukee.

I consumed as much as I could. I read Jeff Pearlman’s book. And I definitely benefitted from living in the Youtube era, watching clips of interviews. And I watched the HBO documentary, “A Minority of One,” about him. When you listen, you hear he is soft-spoken and reserved, but I don’t think an impression does him justice. I was just trying to capture his essence.

He has contributed so much on so many fronts. I think people will appreciate the fullness of the series and how it captures the different facets of Kareem, of who he is as a person

**Q. Had you used the skyhook in college? Was it easy to rediscover it for the show?**

I did use it in college. It was nowhere near as graceful as Kareem’s, but I had some success with it – I led the conference in field goal percentage basically shooting that, going over the right shoulder.

Getting ready for the series I allowed myself no days off – every day I'd get the reps in working on the skyhook. And because of the pause from COVID after we shot the pilot, I had a lot of time to do as many reps as possible. I filmed and took photos of my shots, comparing it to Kareem's highlights online.

**Q. The series uses very brief snippets of action. How much basketball did you film?**

A lot. Capital A-L-O-T. We would spend a day on one sequence. We were very sore bodies at the end.

There were very specific things they wanted us to do. They wanted us to capture the essence of the players' moves. We had people who came in to help craft the basketball to fit the story.

The other thing was that the background players and the people who did some of the basketball stunts were absolutely fabulous. And when they came on the court it was game on – the competition level just soared and it brought a wonderful amount of authenticity.

**Q. You were playing someone who was smart and thoughtful but also often angry and aloof. The other actors were portraying players who teased and sniped and bonded in the locker room. For your acting debut, did you try the Method approach and stay away or did you hang out with them?**

I did not isolate myself. It's like that famous quote [reportedly said by Laurence Olivier to Dustin Hoffman], "That's why it's called acting." We had so much fun together. I'm goofy and as involved with the teasing as everyone else until they said the cameras were rolling.

**Q. Are you heading back to teaching or do you plan to pursue more acting roles?**

I'm still technically visiting faculty at Duke, where I taught a course last spring about sports and inequality. But I'll definitely pursue more acting. I got the bug. It's a wonderful craft.

I've taught at the high school and college level, but when I think about the impact a good TV show or film or theater performance has had on my life it is neck and neck with what I learned in traditional learning spaces. Acting is like reaching a classroom of millions of people.