

WORDS BY JOHN POWELL

When pro athletes need to get somewhere in a hurry, they had better know Al Palagonia,

# The Man Who Never Sleeps



Palagonia and his biggest client, Shaquille O'Neal

**A**L PALAGONIA HAS A CELL PHONE ATTACHED TO HIS LEFT EAR AND A LANDLINE ATTACHED TO HIS RIGHT. It's just before noon on a Friday, and Palagonia is helping a client find a quick flight today. He's only been at it for five days with his new company, Apollo Jets, a company that helps athletes and executives avoid the hassles of commercial flights via private airplanes, and he's hustling to make a deal. "You're not a difficult customer," he tells the man on the other side of the phone. "You're making me work harder and I'm happy to do that to get you what you want." Getting people what they want has made Palagonia very successful - and a lot of famous friends.

It's not unusual to turn on an NBA game to see Palagonia sitting courtside. "I love basketball and I like being visible," he says. Several people in his office laugh out loud. If you know Al, and everyone seems to know Al, you know visibility is part of the job. "This job is as much about who you know as it is what you know," he says. "Yesterday, a guy called me to say he had a plane flying empty from Los Angeles to New York. It set the wheels spinning in my head. I remembered another guy who was flying the same route that day. I got the guy a better plane and a better deal. You can be smarter than me, or more handsome, or have more money, but I guarantee you, you will never outwork me." And like many of the athletes Palagonia deals with on a daily basis, if you're not hustling, someone is going to take your job.

To have a client base of professional athletes is to make yourself available 24 hours a day. When you factor in different time zones, night games, road trips, and the other factors that make an athlete's schedule completely different than a 9-to-5 office worker, an athlete needs a contact that cannot just survive phone calls at irregular hours, but thrive on them. It's one of the reasons Palagonia has been accepted so quickly in the pro athlete community. It's not uncommon for people to call him at 2 a.m. and get a call back at 2:01 a.m. "I have been flying private for over 10 years and never have a met anyone like Al Palagonia," says Shaquille O'Neal, the future Hall of Fame center for the Phoenix Suns. "For the last 2 years, Al has provided me with the best planes, pricing, and service I have ever experienced." Shaq's not the only basketball superstar that has Palagonia on his speed



dial. When the Redeem Team returned to the United States after capturing the gold medal in basketball, many of the players relied on Palagonia to get them from the USOC facility in Minneapolis to their homes quickly and safely.

How does Palagonia do it? "I don't sleep," he says. "I just take naps. If I get three hours, that's a lot. On the weekends, I catch

up." At least some weekends. "Next week, Spike and I are going out to see the Lakers - Knicks play. I'm also going to meet with a few potential clients." The Spike in question is Spike Lee, one of Palagonia's best friends. They met through basketball, of course.

During the nineties, in a previous lifetime to Palagonia, athletes were coming to him to do some money managing for them, even the greatest, Michael Jordan. It was one night at a Knicks/Bulls playoff game, where Palagonia made a friendship that would change his life. "I was sitting courtside for the game, Spike Lee was sitting about eight rows behind me. I asked him why he wasn't sitting courtside. He said he didn't know the right people to get courtside seats. I said 'I'm the guy to know to get courtside tickets.'" Palagonia got Lee courtside seats for the next game.

**"Al Palagonia is the greatest sales person I know. He is also as big a sports fan as me so it's a natural fit for him to be working so closely with his athletes, flying them all over the world." — SPIKE LEE**

They got along so well, Lee offered Palagonia a part in his next film at the time, *Girl 6*. Palagonia told Lee, "Spike, if you're not going to pay me \$500,000, it's not worth my time." And he meant it. As a financial broker, that's how much Palagonia was making in a bad month. In a good month, he could clear a million. When Lee came to Palagonia with a part in his basketball classic "He Got Game," it was an offer Palagonia couldn't refuse. "Ray Allen was one of my favorite players," he says. "The opportunity to play a sports agent trying to recruit him was too good to pass up." Since then, Palagonia has had a role in seven other feature films, including "Summer of Sam" and Lee's most recent, "Miracle at St. Anna."

"It's ironic," Palagonia says. "Spike and I flew our first private flight together. We went to Indiana for the Knicks/Pacers playoff series. That was the series where Reggie Miller was trash talking with Spike during the game. At the hotel, Pacer fans were banging on our doors. I told Spike, 'The next time we come here; I'm flying private and leaving the same night.' It's funny how things come full circle.

Indeed, since Lee and Palagonia escaped rabid Pacer fans in the dark of night, flying private has become a necessity for businessmen who have to be several places in a day. "When you take into consideration the time it takes you to get through security, to check your baggage, to pick it up, to find your ground transportation, an executive is lucky he can visit two cities in one day. Maybe he's out of the office two or three days to visit offices or plants around the country. By flying private, he saves so much time he can do it all in a day. When you consider how valu-



Palagonia and Ray Allen on the set of *He Got Game*

able that person's time is in making the company money, flying private probably saves that company money, because they have a critical person where they are supposed to be—making money.”

If there's one thing that Palagonia understands, it's how to make money. He knew he was a good salesman even when he was six years old. “I remember my neighbors were having a yard sale,” he says. “I can still remember them holding the cash, making change for people.” Palagonia was inspired enough at age 6 to have a yard sale of his own. One day, while his parents were at work and his older sisters were watching him, he lugged everything he could carry out of the house down to the sidewalk—chairs, silverware, anything that he could carry. “When my parents came home,” Palagonia remembers, “they saw me sitting on the kitchen floor counting a wad of cash. I had sold the chairs. It was \$167. My mother screamed at me, ‘Where did you get that money from.’ That wasn't even the best sales job! The best sales job was getting people to give me the stuff back for what they paid for it.”

It was as a financial broker that Palagonia made his name and a lot of money. “My first year at D.H. Blair, I made a million dollars,” he says. “At my peak, I was making that in a month.” During that time, Palagonia lived a life that allowed him to understand what it is that a pro athlete goes through. “Like most of these guys, I came from a household where we didn't have much. My father worked in sanitation, my mother was a nurse. I didn't understand what real money was until I started making it myself. As soon as I did, everyone was reaching out for their share. I was buying people houses and cars.”



After a mis-step on Wall Street, Palagonia left the industry. “Let's just say I took a short cut and it came back to bite me in the ass.” Once he wasn't earning at the same capacity, many of the same people for whom he had given so much turned their back on him. “That's when you learn who your friends are. People like Spike Lee never turned their back on me. They were always there for me, and I'll always be there for them.”

There were a lot of entrepreneurs who still knew about Palagonia's work ethic and his Rolodex of fiercely loyal friends (many of whom had a lot of money and weren't friends with

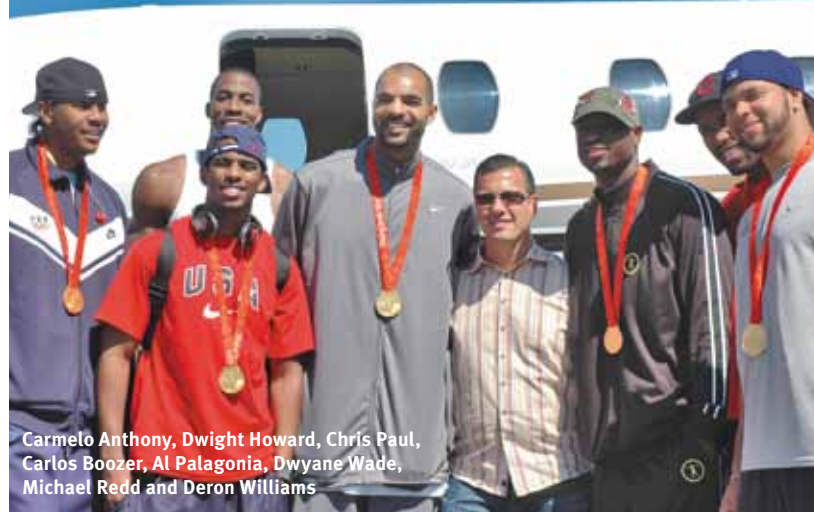
Palagonia for what he could provide financially). A good friend, Greg Cohen asked him if he would consider the private jet business. After doing some research, Palagonia saw it as a great marriage between his ability to sell and his connections around the country and he has been grateful to Greg ever since. The rest is aviation history. “I never take no for an answer,” Palagonia says. “Every no I get is another step closer to yes.” As an example, he relates a story of an unnamed athlete who has

told him that he would never leave his current private jet firm because he believes they are the safest jets to fly. “I'm going to prove to him,” Palagonia says, “not convince him. Prove to him why the jets we provide are as safe, if not safer. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if I'm your friend or not; what matters is that I get you the safest, most comfortable flight at the best deal. If I can do that for you, I'm going to win.” And with that Palagonia has one more thing that makes him even more similar to his pro clients. Winning is everything. ■



Howard, Boozer and Wade bring home the gold for Palagonia

## Who are those guys with Al Palagonia?



Carmelo Anthony, Dwight Howard, Chris Paul, Carlos Boozer, Al Palagonia, Dwyane Wade, Michael Redd and Deron Williams



Shaq is ready to take flight