

Once homeless, Raheem Shabazz transformed into most prominent trainer in Memphis

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On a morning in which lashing downpours floated cars down streets, Raheem Shabazz begins his day 18 minutes late. He jogs from his truck to the shelter of an overhang at the back entrance to Hamilton High School, rain soaking through his T-shirt and shorts.

Upstairs, in an old and rusting weight room, his first two clients of the day are waiting. They sit on a pair of desks shoved against the wall, two top-40 recruits kept awake by rap music emanating from an iPad. Here, K.J. and Dedric Lawson push themselves to the limit five days per week beginning at 6 a.m. sharp, and five days per week Raheem Shabazz is the man who inflicts the strain.

Wearing white shorts, black basketball sneakers and a black T-shirt with the letters C-E-O across the chest, Shabazz, 33, is the man the Lawsons love to hate. He tortures their bodies with boxing combinations, sprints, squats and hurdles until sweat pools on the linoleum floor.

“What’s Skal been talking about?” K.J. Lawson asks between sets.

The elder Lawson is inquiring about Skal Labissiere, another of Shabazz’s clients who is ranked as high as the No. 3 recruit in the country. Each workout with the Lawsons is followed by a crosstown drive to Lausanne Collegiate School, where Shabazz is the strength and conditioning coach, for another grueling session with Labissiere. In the span of a few hours he trains three of the most high-profile athletes in the city.

Yet the man behind the weights remains largely unknown to the public, a man who found himself homeless as recently as 2006 and now calls Penny Hardaway both a client and one of his best friends. It’s a fairy-tale rise rooted in fatherhood, fate, fairness and family that made Shabazz the most influential trainer in Memphis

But there’s a good chance you’ve never even heard his name.

The upbringing

Carrying a bag of clothes in one arm and his son, Tahj, in the other, Shabazz boarded a Greyhound bus in Chattanooga and headed west, unsure of everything else.

The five-hour ride to Memphis in 2006 afforded Shabazz plenty of time to think: about the four years of college football that left him without a degree, about the strained relationship with the mother of his child, about what he was going to do in a city where he had no house, no car and no job prospects.

“I was scared to death,” Shabazz said.

Father and son spent their first night in Memphis at the bus station, with Tahj sleeping on Shabazz’s lap. When they awoke, reality set in. And that meant Shabazz needed to find a job.

But athleticism was the only life he knew, a trait unearthed at a recreation center in his hometown of Chattanooga. He attached himself to his older brother, Idris Harper, and together they frequented the recreation center every day after school, dabbling in track, horseshoes, softball, baseball, basketball and anything else with a winner and loser. Harper, who went on play basketball at Tennessee-Chattanooga, was the role model Shabazz hoped to please.

Shabazz followed Harper onto the basketball court at Chattanooga High School, and were it not for a game of catch with his best friend, the hardwood is where he would have remained. He was tossing a ball with Stevland Sills, point guard of the basketball team and quarterback of the football team, when the idea arose that Shabazz’s speed and agility would translate beautifully to wide receiver.

He convinced his mom, struck a deal with his high school basketball coach and learned pass patterns 20 minutes before the first day of practice his junior year. After touchdowns on his first two plays, Shabazz was hooked.

“I’ve been playing ever since,” said Shabazz, who starred as a junior and senior.

Shabazz’s success prompted his birth father, who lived in Cleveland, to call the coaches at Ohio State, the school his son grew up rooting for. He submitted a highlight tape and questionnaire, then crossed his fingers. Shabazz was accepted as a preferred walk-on in 1999.

The coaches redshirted Shabazz as a freshman, which allowed him to spend four days per week in the weight room. His body transformed under the proper guidance of a strength and conditioning coach for the first time. Speed and weight training became an obsession, aided by the intake of creatine. He spent hour after hour in the gym, solidifying his knowledge base for a career he never knew he’d have.

“I fell in love,” Shabazz said.

The crash

Seven years later, Shabazz left the bus station in Memphis in need of work.

He uprooted himself to be closer to his son, preferring to start fresh in the city where his son's mother lived rather than shuttle Tahj back and forth to Chattanooga. (Shabazz said he and his ex-wife share joint custody of Tahj.) He got a job selling flashlights and earpiece radios door-to-door, which lasted a week before he secured a position at Sports Authority in Cordova. Still without a car, Shabazz walked to work every morning for a stockroom shift that began at 4 a.m.

Within a year he moved to a job at Circle K, and his mother found a 1989 Acura Legend he bought for \$200. Then came the car accident that changed his life.

A teenager collided with Shabazz's car — Tahj was in the backseat — in a residential neighborhood in September of 2007. A police officer named Vikki Saine came to the scene. A year later she was Shabazz's wife.

"From the first date I knew it was something special," Shabazz said.

Within a few months they were living together, Shabazz and Tahj joining Vikki and her two children to make a family of five. Vikki was impressed by his smile and the way he bonded with her kids. Shabazz still remembers the green shirt and brown capri pants she wore on their first date at the Delta Fair.

They worked out together at the gym, and Vikki was struck by his vast knowledge of exercise science, his ability to discuss specific muscles groups in the human body. Though Shabazz was still hoping for a pro football career (he played on teams in Mississippi and Texas after moving to Memphis), Vikki made a suggestion: Become a strength and conditioning coach instead.

"I kept saying the word natural because that's the only thing that came to mind," Vikki said. "It just clicked."

The ascent

Flash forward to the present and the driving rain outside Hamilton High School is muffled by the thwack of glove on mitt inside the weight room. Shabazz and a shirtless K.J. Lawson circle each other in the middle of the floor, the teacher guiding his pupil through a boxing workout.

It's a scene identical to one that unfolded in a hotel gym the night before Hamilton's state tournament game last season. A restless K.J. craved a late-night workout, so he called Shabazz, who traveled out for the game. For an hour they boxed as the clock ticked toward midnight, Shabazz happy to help a client he considers a little brother.

Though special, the closeness between Shabazz and the Lawsons is not unique. From his days growing up in a large family in Chattanooga to life as a single parent before he met Vikki, Shabazz has become a protector of sorts. Each of the nine

clients that spoke to The Commercial Appeal — he has more than 200 in total — said they were treated with respect, treated like family, treated like one of his own.

That includes Skal Labissiere, who began working with Shabazz in 10th grade and was, in many ways, the epicenter of Shabazz's clientele. Vikki's career suggestion prompted Shabazz to become a certified personal trainer in March of 2011, and after hosting a few free speed and agility clinics he was hired at the Jewish Community Center. There, he taught classes while simultaneously accruing clients for private instruction.

Labissiere was his first elite client, and the two connected thanks to a recommendation from a staff member at the University of Memphis. As Labissiere blossomed, the athletic community took notice.

Shabazz was hired by Lausanne to be the head strength and conditioning coach late in 2012, and his work with the basketball team contributed to a state title in 2013. Now his days begin at 6 a.m. with the Lawsons, continue at 7:30 a.m. with Labissiere, feature a host of private clients throughout the day and finish when he trains the Lausanne teams after school.

He's progressed from training co-workers to a client list that includes the Lawson brothers, Labissiere, a wealth of former Tiger basketball players (Shawn Taggart, Pierre Henderson-Niles, Earl Barron, Jeremy Hunt, Joe Jackson) and anyone else who wants to get better. One of his favorite clients is a middle-aged mother with osteoporosis.

What makes Shabazz's training unique, according to multiple clients, is his ability to devise specific exercises and workout plans to help individuals reach their target goals. He is able, for example, to strengthen K.J. Lawson while focusing on explosion and athleticism with Dedric. He can help, for instance, Henderson-Niles shed 75 pounds in three months as easily as he guides Taggart to become more toned, cut up.

And if his clients ever need proof that his methods work, all they do is look at Shabazz, who at 33 is a 225-pound, self-trained ball of muscle.

"He's probably the best trainer in the city," Labissiere said. "I still think he's kind of underrated."

And then there's Penny. From afar, Penny Hardaway had observed Shabazz through his work with the Lawsons. He was impressed by the transformation of their bodies and the way it improved their on-court performance, so he told his assistant to make a phone call.

"The day he walked through the door at Lausanne I couldn't believe it," Shabazz said. "I was star-struck but I had to play it cool."

His goal was to treat Hardaway like any other client, charging him the same \$50 per session that he does for all pro athletes. Hardaway noticed.

“He impressed me that he didn’t try to go overboard,” Hardaway said. “That he didn’t try to bump the price up more because it was me.”

Since March, Shabazz has helped Hardaway drop 17 pounds to get within a whisper of his playing weight in the NBA. They work out multiple times each week, including a pool workout at Hardaway’s house on Fridays.

They’ve become fast friends in the last five months, forging a bond highlighted by the exchange of NFL memes via text message, gifts of sneakers and a phone call from Hardaway to Shabazz’s wife for her birthday. Hardaway hired Shabazz to be the trainer for his AAU program, and in the spring Shabazz will join the staff at Hardaway’s new basketball training facility in Cordova.

“One day it all hit me,” Shabazz said. “I just stopped and broke down crying, thanking God for how far I’ve been allowed to come.”

He doesn’t have to sleep in a bus station anymore.