

MJ is My Man

When I say MJ, I am not referring to the recently deceased King of Pop. Although Michael Jackson was a great musician, there is, however, a greater MJ that I am talking about. He is a man who tried his hand in a variety of areas. He dabbled on the baseball diamond, although it was minor leagues; he ruled the big screen with Bugs Bunny in *Space Jam*; and he will always be remembered as the king of the basketball court. I am talking about no one other than the great Michael Jordan. Along with every other boy my age, Michael was my hero. Let's be honest for a second, what little boy growing up in the 1990s did not look up to MJ? He had it all: the NBA championships, the MVP's, even his own brand of shoes. Number twenty-three inspired kids everywhere to grab a ball and find the nearest court, whether it be asphalt, wood, or gravel, and just play for the love of the game. However, as I grew older, my idolization of Michael Jordan drastically changed. My obsession had matured from modeling my playing style after the player on the court to looking up to the man beyond all of the glory. Many do not consider Michael the best role model because of certain character deficiencies, but I believe that these character flaws are actually what made Michael Jordan one of the biggest inspirations in my life.

Being born in the Midwest, my love for basketball seems to have been an evolutionary trait necessary for me to survive in the land of cornfields and *Hoosiers*. If one was a boy growing up in this region of the country, he loved basketball no matter what. One would follow college hoops, especially professional ball, and even high school basketball. One would wait in line for what seemed like hours wasting valuable recess time on the playground in order to get a little bit of precious time on the court. The only problem was that if you weren't any good, this valuable time you waited so long for would be very short lived. Therefore, many kids modeled their type of playing style after major NBA stars. On any given blacktop court, you could find self-proclaimed Charles Barkleys, Scottie Pippins's, and a ton of Michael Jordans. This is where my original obsession with Michael Jordan developed. I decided that if I was going to be a player, I wanted to be the best. I would spend hours in our gravel driveway holding my own practices. I would slash to the basket trying to switch hands mid layup, each time sticking my tongue out so I could be exactly "like Mike." I worked my ass off practicing that fade-away jumper he had down to an art form to hand so many teams last second defeats. Thus, the first thing that Michael, along with my dad, taught me was the discipline of practice and working hard. Looking back, my dad taught me most of the benefits of working hard, but Air Jordan was the inspiration. I would have never done it if I hadn't wanted to be exactly like Michael.

After I had practiced my game enough and I felt that I sufficiently possessed certain aspects of the arsenal of MJ, I took my game to the court with the older guys. I did this because I had read in a *Sports Illustrated* or some sort of Michael spotlight article that he had grown up playing on the court with his older brothers and their friends, and since I had no older brothers I decided to go there by myself. That first day at the park, I was so intimidated. I felt so tiny and weak next to those guys, but when the game started all of that seemed to disappear. I just played my game and had fun. I would like to say that I dropped 69 points, like Michael did against Cleveland, but truth was I went maybe three for seven. By no means was it a spectacular performance, but it was good enough for them to respect me and invite me back. The more I played ball with those guys, the better friends I became with them. I ended up finding one of my best friends, Levi, in that group of guys. Yeah, we bonded over basketball and how great Michael was, but our friendship was more than that. He was the type of guy who was always there for me no matter what. I can only attribute the start of this friendship to Michael. MJ had

inspired a certain self confidence in me that I had never felt before. Thanks to him, I was confident enough to step out of my comfort zone and be my own person around the older guys, consequently making one of my best friends.

Around the time I was about thirteen or fourteen, I started reading the intensive biographies about Michael Jordan and the skeletons in his closet. I learned, in detail, for the first time about how the death of his father had affected his career and his personal life. I learned that his mourning had taken form in a horrible gambling problem. He had ended up putting his career on hold because of these extenuating circumstances. I struggled with understanding how the greatest basketball player could let an off-court drama take him away from the game that he loved. Finding this new information out, I definitely took him off the pedestal a little bit. MJ was still my hero, but for the first time I looked at Michael as an example of what not to do. Michael's stumble was just the reminder I needed when my grandmother passed away my junior year of high school. I found that dealing with the grief was extremely difficult for me. She was a woman who was another huge influence in my life. It would have been easy for me to look for complete refuge and comfort in things that would temporarily take the pain away, but I remembered Michael and how his inability to cope with his emotions took him away from one of the things he held most dear. His bad example had become my shining example, and MJ helped steer me away from a path that I had already set out on.

As I have grown older and older, I have learned more about who Michael Jordan is as a man off the court. Although the player MJ inspired me to work hard, be poised, and be confident, it is the man Michael Jordan that has inspired me to be someone better than myself. He inspired me to be a better man by showing me his true character when I had the opportunity to meet my hero on a golf course in Austin at about age fifteen. I was able to meet Michael in the clubhouse after his round of golf and I got his autograph and all that useless stuff, but what I really wanted was to just talk to him for a few minutes about what a hero he had been to me growing up. I never got this chance. He didn't even look up when he signed his rookie card; he just shrugged me off and pretended like he didn't hear me. I know he was probably busy and had places to go, but there weren't more than seven people in that room, and he didn't even give me the time of day. This was excusable because he was/is one of the most popular basketball players of all time. However, the dagger to the heart was seeing how he treated the people around him. MJ was just downright rude to the people working at the golf course and the people working for him. He treated them as if they barely existed in this world and that their whole reason for existence was to take care of him. After seeing this display of arrogance and disrespect, I promised myself that no matter how successful I became I would never treat people any differently.

Despite all of my efforts when I was younger, I was never going to be Michael Jordan or even the next Michael Jordan. Now, I don't want to be anything like Michael Jordan. However, even through his downfalls and deficiencies, Michael Jordan has been a great inspiration for me because he has helped me find my own way. Yes, MJ is still the man, but in my opinion he is not a man that I want to be like in every aspect of my life. I was able to learn from his character flaws and discover for myself what type of person I want to become. Without Michael as an inspiration, there are valuable life lessons I would never have wanted to learn, varying from the benefits of focus to the importance of humility. Therefore, through the good and the bad, I am immensely thankful for the unknowing role MJ has played in my life.