

## On Saying Goodbye to Michael Jordan

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At this writing, there's much ado about a documentary series on Netflix called "The Last Dance." I guess it's on the 1997-'98 Michael Jordan-starring Chicago Bulls team in the National Basketball Association during a year they won the league championship. I say "I guess" because I don't get Netflix and haven't seen any of it. I read the series' focus isn't on basketball-playing but rather the personal drama of these men who made a living throwing a ball into a metal cylinder—how "Mike" (Jordan) trash-talked up a storm and hit Steve Kerr in the eye with a punch, the mountain of cocaine that got snorted that year, though I don't know if Mike was supposed to have done any of it, and the escapades of Dennis Rodman, an orange-haired, tattooed neaderthalic creature whose gift to the world was being able to jump up and grab a ball as it bounced off a flat surface called a backboard before the others who were trying to do the same thing. Reveling in that two-decades-and-counting gossip is what America has come to in this year of 2020 when we have all been hiding out in fear of a rampaging deadly virus that for some reason hasn't killed anybody we know.

I remember back in the late '90s I couldn't get enough news about the Bulls and their gargantuan head coach Phil Jackson, whose shoulders were so wide he must have had to go through doors sideways, and his beloved "triangle offense," which nobody, perhaps even the players, could understand—one of life's great mysteries. As I think about it, it was a one-way relationship between me and the Bulls: I cared deeply about them, heroes all—imagine being able to bounce a ball like that!—but as far as I can tell, they cared little if anything about me, and probably still don't.

All the hoopla around the "Last Dance" and feeling left out of being able to relive those truly historic events through the good graces of Netflix--I think it's also on Hulu, but I don't get that

either—got me to do the next best thing and I rented a 53-minute ESPN-produced documentary called “Jordan Rides the Bus.” It recounted Jordan’s year away from basketball in 1994 when he played professional baseball. He had quit the Bulls and signed up with the major league Chicago White Sox, who sent him down to their minor league team, the Birmingham (Alabama) Barons.

“Bus” in the documentary’s title refers to minor league players taking a bus to away games rather than flying, which gets at the meager existence of minor league level baseball performers. The idea is that here was Michael Jordan, huge basketball star, leaving all that fame and money to chase his dream at thirty-one of being a professional baseball player. At the time, the word was that Jordan was in fact serving a year’s suspension from the NBA for his gambling exploits. However, the documentary series, produced with Jordan’s full cooperation, says that Jordan was in fact honoring his late father, who fervently wanted him to play baseball. Mr. Jordan had recently been murdered by a couple of teenagers while sleeping off the effects of excessive alcohol consumption in his car parked on the side of a highway.

I was writing a book about sports and kids at that time, 1994. In the book, I argued that by far the biggest factor accounting for success in any sport is natural talent. You can have all the dedication in the world, work day and night and never give up and all that other good stuff, but if Mom and Dad didn’t provide you with the genetic wherewithal for success in a particular sport, while you might manage to become competent at it, you’re never going to be anything special. I was implying that this hard fact of life applies to other areas besides sports: if you don’t have the natural talent in whatever it is, you’re going to wind up, well, if not unhappy, less than enthused about your connection to that endeavor, as well as about your life generally.

That nature-over-nurture claim countered the feel-good notion that success is due to hard work and not chromosomes. A bullshit-spreader by the name of Malcolm Gladwell made a ton of money from a book he wrote called *Outliers* where he repeatedly—as in

*repeatedly*—pontificates the “10,000-Hour Rule”: that the way to achieve world-class expertise in any skill is but a matter of practicing in the right way for around 10,000 hours. I’m here to tell you that I could have practiced the right way of playing basketball for ten *million* hours and I still wouldn’t have been able to make the freshman team at Mankato State College in my home state of Minnesota much less the NBA.

Back to my book-writing, I have a background in baseball and immediately upon seeing clips on television of Jordan swinging at a baseball, I knew with a dead certainty he’d never make it as a baseball player. The talking heads on the TV clips were going on about how good Jordan was as a kid playing baseball, how committed he was to making it to the majors with the White Sox, and how he was getting instruction from top hitting coaches and knocking the ball over the fence in batting practice. But it was obvious to me from his mechanical and awkward flailing at the baseball with a bat that looked too heavy for him that the jury had reached a verdict in his case—guilty of high-school-level mediocrity as charged (by me).

Jordan, 6’6” inches tall, looked just fine in a basketball uniform but skinny-weird in a baseball uniform. I remember a shot of him crouching down behind home plate receiving a pitcher’s warm-up throws before the start of an inning while the catcher was putting on his protective gear. When Jordan was finished with his replacement task and started to get up out of his crouch, he looked like a giraffe trying to stand up.

There was a clip showing Jordan batting in a game where the pitcher was putting speed on the ball and not just laying it in there soft and easy like they do in batting practice. Looking at that sealed the deal for me: Jordan’s swing was simply too slow; he wasn’t fast enough on the trigger. (Flash forward: that’s the fatal flaw in Tim Tebow, a former football star now trying to play baseball.)

I was on a deadline with the book I was writing, but I was sure it would be safe to write that Jordan was naturally gifted at basketball but not in baseball, and that no matter how much effort

he put into baseball, he was doomed to failure in that sport (as is Tim Tebow); I wasn't going to have to insert an erratum slip into the pages of my book when it came out. Sure enough, Jordan hit .202 that year in Birmingham (a very low batting average) and was known to miff a fly ball or two in the outfield, and that was the end of his baseball career. I read today that the manager of the Bears back then is now saying that Jordan had it all going for him and would have made the majors if he hadn't gone back to basketball. Join the Malcolm Gladwell bullshit club.

So here I am, today—it's mid-May of 2020, twenty-six years later—sitting on my leather couch watching “Jordan Rides the Bus.” About twelve minutes into it, it washes over me, “What the hell am I watching this silliness for?” There was Jordan, looking eight feet tall in his baseball uniform with his cap tilted up, giving an interview to reporters in their polo shirts. He looked like a giant cartoon character. He was mumbling total inanities (“I'm taking it a day at a time”—what's the alternative?), his rapt audience—which, sadly, at the time included me—hanging on his every mumbling. If you are over twelve and saying that your wish is to play baseball for living, you deserve to be sent to your room and not let out until you come up with a better ambition.

Fifteen minutes into “Jordan Rides the Bus,” I shut it off. I felt embarrassed to be, well, over twelve watching this ridiculously-tall numbnut trying to hit a ball with a club and reciting clichés at the lowest end of the cliché hierarchy. Please, Robert—please, please, please, please, please, please!—stop giving energy to this tripe. Do something else with your life! It turned out to be crossword puzzle—not the greatest, but it's a start.

Filling in the blanks in the crossword puzzle (“Creator of Fearless Fosdick—Al Capp”), it hit me that not only have I finally had enough of Michael Jordan, I've at long last played out the string with the cheapjack commercial sport industry altogether (which includes the media that make their living hyping it). Since I was eight-years-old, I have closely attended to the ballgame shows and their headline acts. First thing every morning, the sports page of

the newspaper, and the games on television. About a year ago, I cut out the commercial-laced televised games and went to ten-minute highlights on YouTube, which was a step forward. But the internet and the websites have been out of control—ESPN, Yahoo Sports, The Ringer, Bleacher Report, Sports Illustrated, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Post*, and then repeat; all day, morning to bedtime. Every book that has anything to do with sports, I have read it. The latest, ex-basketball great Jerry West's life story. He's had problems with depression, I bet you didn't know that. Well, I do.

The truth is I don't really know what I am going to do with my time when I'm no longer obsessing about the ballgames and the ballgamers, but I've summoned up the courage to take on that challenge. Goodbye Tua Tagovailoa (a 22-year-old quarterback who just signed up to play with the Miami Dolphins pro football team). And star quarterback Tom Brady, you are going to have to handle your move from the New England Patriots and its great coach Bill Belichick to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on your own. And goodbye to you, Michael.

I was thinking of ending this website thought with a "fuck you!" to the whole sport show enterprise for wasting all the time in my life I won't get back. But as I think about it, it wasn't their fault. They were just making a living selling the equivalent of Big Macs. I didn't have to eat their junk food all day every day. And actually, it was kind of tasty until it made me slightly sick to my stomach and want to take a nap, and it filled up a life I really didn't know what to do with otherwise. So it's not fuck you but rather a wistful goodbye to Michael Jordan. I wish him and all the other sports personalities the best of health and good fortune while I try to figure out what to do without them in my life.