



Rare Air time: Michael Jordan, the '84 U.S. Olympic trials and me

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Thirty years ago the circus came to my town. Only the attractions weren't animals, clowns and tightrope walkers. No, they were abnormally tall men in their early 20s. In the spring of 1984, Bob Knight was tasked with putting together the roster of the U.S. men's basketball team he was going to coach in that summer's Olympics in Los Angeles. So he invited six dozen of the top amateur players to the site of his kingdom and my hometown -- Bloomington, Ind. -- for auditions. As Karl Malone, then a burly forward at Louisiana Tech, put it to *Sports Illustrated* at the time, "They said they was gettin' the best 72 and they wasn't tellin' no stories."

In keeping with Knight's sensibilities, the players were not exactly coddled. They lodged in rooms at the Indiana University Student Union and ate in the cafeteria. They were transported around town in maroon vans, three players per row. The tryouts were held not at the venerable Assembly Hall but at the IU Fieldhouse, a no-frills gym smelling of body odor and liniment. There was no hospitality, no security detail, no hangers-on. When practice was over, the players were on their own, ambling around town, sometimes accepting rides to the movies from strangers.

For a 13-year-old incurable basketball junkie, this was a hell of a speedball. After school, I would pedal my bike a mile or so to the Student Union and observe/accost the same players I'd been watching on television a few months earlier. I stood back and watched 285-lb. Charles Barkley put on a heroic eating display. I

played video games with Wayman Tisdale and pool against Chris Mullin. They seemed happy for the company.

[SI VAULT: '84 team might be best Olympic squad ever, by Curry Kirkpatrick \(04.30.84\)](#)

To a man, the players were exceptionally cool, uncorrupted by fame or money and giddy about the Olympics and, more generally, their bright futures. Even so, one player had a different level of magnetism and charisma. Wearing bermuda shorts, collared shirts and a permanent smile, Michael Jordan walked around with a braying confidence that suggested he knew what successes awaited. He joked easily in a deep voice and dispensed nicknames. One day, he spotted me carrying a tennis racket. "Hey John McEnroe!" he said, miming tennis strokes. "When are we gonna play?" Around town, his autograph didn't carry much currency, as supply kept pace with demand.

Of course, Jordan could play a little basketball too. He'd just finished his third season at North Carolina -- ironically, losing to Indiana in his final college game -- as the national player of the year and was pegged as a high lottery pick. At the Olympics trials, his aura grew, as he distanced himself from the other players. My friend and classmate, Pat Knight, the coach's son, regaled the seventh grade kaffeeklatsch with stories of Jordan's feats during practices. Bob Knight gushed uncharacteristically about his shooting guard and warned that any NBA team foolish enough to pass up drafting Jordan would regret the decision. "Jordan's game is made for the NBA," he declared. Knight wasn't entirely prescient that spring; the players he cut from his team included Malone, Barkley, John Stockton and Joe Dumars. But he sure had Jordan pegged.

Jordan breezed through the various rounds of cuts as the roster was winnowed to 12 players and two alternates. The team was now practicing at Assembly Hall and, hoping to catch Jordan in action, a few of us hatched an elaborate plot to sneak into a team practice. It was totally unnecessary. We simply walked into

the gym through an unlocked door and sat in the bleachers. Such was life in a sleepy college town during the spring.


At one point, Jordan blew by four men, including Ewing, and threw down a dunk. Even Knight let loose an admiring whistle that pierced their air. That afternoon, I saw Jordan, alone, at his favorite haunt in Bloomington, the Chocolate Moose ice cream shop. I told him what I'd seen. "You know what, John McEnroe," he said, "That wasn't even my best dunk."

Jordan was the third pick in the NBA draft that summer. A few weeks later, he led the U.S. team to the gold medal. And then he really blew up. In the retelling of the Jordan Narrative, he didn't officially arrive until he led to Bulls to title in 1991. In truth, a few months into his rookie season, he'd already cracked the Bird-Magic duopoly.

The NBA All-Star Game was held in Indianapolis that season and, in still another stroke of good luck, I won tickets through some local radio giveaway. (Belated thanks, *Bob and Tom Morning Show* on Q95.) Before the game I huddled with other autograph hounds near the lip of the court. When Jordan came out for warm-ups, he saw me, stopped and turned. "Hey, John McEnroe," he said, cackling and shaking my hand. "What's going on?" That interval, five seconds max, may well have been the highlight of my teenage years.

It would be more than 10 years before I would again see Jordan, up close and in person. In that time, he'd win three NBA titles, establish himself as an iconic figure, retire and then return. In 1996, I was writing an article for an airline magazine on a prominent announcer and saw Jordan in the tunnel of an arena. I re-introduced myself and tried to jog his memory. John McEnroe no longer had resonance; he did, however, fondly remember those months in Bloomington and, specifically, the ice cream at the Chocolate Moose.

Fast forward another six years. Jordan was in his late 30s, he'd won six titles and cemented himself as the undisputed Greatest Ever. In the early winter of 2002, he was in the midst of an odd encore with the

A decorative horizontal swoosh that starts as a thick orange line on the left and tapers into a thin yellow line on the right.

Washington Wizards. During a successful stretch, I was assigned to profile him for SI. Watching the pregame mob scene, Jordan ambushed by reporters, handlers and hangers-on, I smiled recalling the kid who walked around Bloomington alone and unbothered in 1984. During a lull in the media frenzy I sidled over and, attempting to establish some connection, started in on a "I'm sure you don't remember, but..." monologue.

"Michael's not taking more questions," a team operative said stonily.

Jordan ignored him. "I remember one place had damn good ice cream," he said, without looking up.

"Okay," the handler said. "Michael won't be available again until tomorrow."