

Some issues raised by Michael Jordan's retirement

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The retirement of basketball player Michael Jordan, after 13 years as a professional athlete, has generated a massive amount of media coverage. One doesn't write an "astounding amount" of coverage only because the US media's response is entirely predictable. Along with scandal-mongering and beating the war drums, cultivating the public's fascination with celebrities is one of their favorite pastimes.

In this case, one must say, at least the celebrity in question is someone of real talent. Here was clearly one of the great athletes of the century, capable of extraordinary feats of physical skill, accomplished with balletic, yet muscular grace and beauty. Jordan's activities around the basket--this is someone who could drive in from the left, leave his feet, end up in mid-air below and to the right of the basket and somehow, in a scooping motion, release the ball accurately up and back toward the hoop before his feet touched the ground--set new standards and raised the limit of the possible, not only for basketball, but for sports as a whole. Ah, we all suddenly realized, so human beings can do *that*!

And it was not simply his explosions and extensions into space that were so memorable. Combined with Jordan's jumping ability and athleticism were an extraordinary shooting touch from long distance, which cut the heart out of more than one opponent, remarkable composure, court sense and a fierce competitive spirit. There is nothing overblown about the accolades being paid to his abilities as a player.

Moreover, Jordan makes a generally favorable impression as a human being. At the press conference January 13 at which he announced his departure from the sport, he paid tribute to a Chicago policeman killed on duty whom, one suspects, he meant to identify with the average working person. He went on: "My responsibility has been to play the game of basketball and relieve some of the pressure of everyday life for people who work 9 to 5, and I've tried to do that to the best of my abilities." Although one should remember that he simply deflected to Nike management with a certain amount of impatience accusations that child sweatshops made his line of sneakers.

Jordan grew up in a working class family in North Carolina. His father (murdered in 1993), the son of a poor farmer who was driving a tractor at the age of ten, apparently inculcated ideas of tolerance and a belief in racial equality in his children. James Jordan, whose closest neighbors and playmates when he was a child were white, "grew up color-blind in an era [he] calls the 'Amos and Andy days,'" according to a 1990 newspaper account.

In that same piece, Michael Jordan told a reporter, "That's the greatest lesson I've learned from my parents. I never see you for the color. I see you for the person you are. I know I'm recognized as being black, but I don't look at you as black or white, just as a person. ... I don't believe in race. I believe in friendship."

If only one could leave it at that--if only one could simply pay tribute to a great athlete and wish him well with the next phase of his life, to which he, unlike countless other athletes, is able to proceed in decent physical condition. But, as with so many aspects of American social life, the Jordan story is also bound up with money and corruption and manipulated dreams.

As magnificent an athlete as he is, it should be said straight out that the sums of money showered on Jordan from his on- and off-court activity--and those generated by him--have been absurd, bordering on the obscene. At an estimated \$78 million a year, Jordan was the top money-maker in sports last year. He earned \$33 million from the Chicago Bulls, and the rest from endorsements, investments and other sources. Jordan gets more than \$20 million annually from Nike, with whom he first signed in 1984, based in part on a percentage of sales. The company paid Jordan more in 1992 than it paid *the entire work-force of 75,000 workers* employed by its subcontractors in Indonesia to manufacture basketball shoes. He also has endorsement deals with Gatorade sports drinks, food and clothing maker Sara Lee, Quaker Oats, cereal maker General Mills, MCI WorldCom and battery maker Rayovac. His personal fortune has been estimated at half a billion dollars.

Jordan has also made others rich. Fortune magazine once calculated that he had generated \$10 billion in the world economy. Nike's Jordan-based products produce more than \$250 million in annual revenue. The stock of the company fell more than four percent Tuesday over concern that his retirement would hurt sales of the company's athletic shoes and apparel. Moreover, economists in Chicago expressed concern about the impact Jordan's departure would have on the well-being of the city. "Clearly ... there has to be some [economic] effect," said Diane Swonk of Bank One Corp.

In a press release issued after his retirement announcement Nike's management boasted (or nearly *warned*) that while the former Chicago Bull had retired from the National Basketball Association, he had not retired from being a pitchman for them. (As a wire service headline put it, "Jordan May Leave Basketball, But Not Marketing Team.") The hope of the firm's management is that the bonanza will continue.

Nike's marketing has combined flattery, promotional hype and worship of wealth in an unpleasant manner. Announcing the introduction of the "Air Jordan XIV" this past autumn, for example, a company spokesperson rhapsodized: "This year's Jordan was inspired by Michael's latest car, the Ferrari 550 Maranello. This car is the epitome of high end, high tech, go-fast auto design." The press statement continued: "The Air Jordan XIV strikes a balance between the athletic and the aesthetic ... between performance and luxury ...between who we are and who we want to be." This is about a basketball shoe, let's remember. Although not just any basketball shoe--the suggested retail price is \$150.

Naturally, Jordan is not responsible for everything said or done in his name, but there is something unsavory and inevitably corrupting about such an enterprise. It would be absurd to imagine that he has progressed, in the words of the *Chicago Tribune*, "from his carefree days as a kid in North Carolina to the pressures of being a corporate giant," with his soul and spirit unscathed.

Nor has the Jordan phenomenon left the population unscathed. One of its more negative consequences no doubt is the cultivation of individualism and selfishness. The media treatment of Jordan's enormous success encourages many young people to believe that they can escape their difficult conditions of life by following the basketball star's path. For ninety-nine point nine percent of them this is an illusion, and a bitter one. It is an illusion that helps to prevent many from looking deeply at the more general causes of their discontent.

The circumstances from which so many young people are suffering--lack of opportunity, poverty, economic and social marginalization--are linked to the cult of celebrity in which for the most part they participate. Excessive celebrity must be linked to inequality, indeed becomes a rationale for inequality and reinforces it, ideologically and materially. The heaping of fame and wealth upon a single individual, or a handful of individuals, is only possible and meaningful if the vast majority have no access to those rewards.

Another question that arises under these conditions is: why the extreme level of adulation? Even granted that Jordan is an extraordinary figure, the attention and media hoopla seem far out of proportion. It might be asked indeed how many of those caught up in the Jordan mania have actually seen him play on a regular basis and how many are simply impressed by the phenomenon. As a 1995 *Chicago Tribune* article, which considered Jordan as "a cultural icon," suggested, "Michael the Marketed cannot be separated from the Magic of Michael."

But beyond that, what is the social significance of an athlete taking center stage in American social life? Polls have shown that Jordan is the celebrity American children most want to talk to, and he has ranked among the most admired people in the eyes of the public. Americans once placed Jordan fifth on a list of "most-respected newsmakers," behind Mother Theresa, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and Ronald Reagan.

In the same 1995 *Tribune* article, sports sociologist Harry Edwards commented, "The critical point is to have someone of extraordinary genius in a particular endeavor ... even if that endeavor is of relative unimportance to the condition of society. Because of that dimension of the extraordinary, he represents the

best and greatest potential of the species--a Gandhi, an Einstein, a Michelangelo."

There is an element of genius in the greatest athlete, and Jordan certainly belongs in that category. But it is a quality that is bound up with and predicated on a considerable degree of natural and instinctive ability. Genius on the basketball court is impossible without certain physical attributes, indeed only comes into being if those attributes--eyesight, coordination, strength, size--are present. The genius that involves imaginatively reconstructing the world socially, scientifically or aesthetically depends on highly-developed mental powers and is of a qualitatively different order.

Edwards' comment is not an explanation, it is simply an accommodation to a distorted state of affairs. Why do Americans invest so heavily in their sports heroes, and celebrities in general? Katarina Witt, the German Olympic figure skating champion, told the *Tribune* reporter, "There is in America a fascination about athletes that is greater than anywhere else in the world."

There are at least two sides to this issue, and both are related to the moral and intellectual vacuum at the center of American society. On the one hand, millions of people are leading lives of quiet desperation, going about their daily lives without any sense of a greater purpose to their existence than the struggle to make ends meet. Largely denied richness and pleasure and variety and meaning, they turn hungrily to the media-chronicled lives of celebrities--who apparently have everything they don't, who are "real" while they are, to themselves, non-existent--in search of a life with content. This vicarious existence stands in for real existence, except because it is not real or substantial, it can never fill them up, and so they are always desperate for more, something, anything to fill up the gaping hole.

On the other hand, this same vacuum manifests itself in the absence of virtually any genuinely attractive figure in politics, the media or public life generally. It was impossible for a sports star to swell to monumental size in the American popular consciousness as long as there were figures who were respected, rightly or wrongly, for their accomplishments on behalf of society as a whole. Who deserves such admiration today? After all, the Jordan retirement coincided with the opening of the Senate trial of Bill Clinton, the latest phase of a process that has degraded and discredited the entire political establishment and exposed it for what it is, a cesspool of reaction.

Jordan is gone. Impossible as it now seems, there will be those who will surpass his accomplishments. Nature and time will more or less automatically take care of that. The social questions raised by his career and retirement are not so easily resolved. They deserve attention.



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