The Last Dance: Basketball star Michael Jordan and professional sports in the 1990s

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The recently released documentary miniseries *The Last Dance* chronicles the championship season of the 1998 Chicago Bulls, with particular focus on the figure of superstar Michael Jordan. Aired on ESPN in April and May, it is currently available on Netflix. ESPN hurried production and release of the 10-part mini-series to help fill the hole in programming produced by the cancellation of live sports in March as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The documentary uses footage, including behind the scenes video, of Jordan and his teammates throughout the course of the last of their six title-winning seasons in the 1990s. It also flashes back to the history of the team from Jordan's first season in 1984, while also touching upon the early lives and upbringings of various players.

Much of the series is standard fare for a sports series, with its focus on the athletic prowess of the individuals in question. *The Last Dance* does shed some light on the effect of the cut-throat competition of professional sports and the unhealthy atmosphere it fosters, however. Jordan's teammates speak of his sometimes abusive behaviour, and footage shows him berating the less-skilled Bulls players. It should be noted that Jordan maintained editorial control over the documentary, and critics, including a number of his teammates, have come out against the series. Much of Jordan's behaviour has already been the subject of sports commentary and books, and the documentary has been taken to task for being too flattering of the former superstar.

The series includes some touching moments as well. *The Last Dance* recounts, for instance, the poverty of Scottie Pippen's family in small-town Arkansas. It also treats Dennis Rodman's mental health issues and the deaths of Jordan's father, killed during a botched robbery, and Steve Kerr's historian father, killed during Lebanon's civil war.

There are historical and social issues bearing on the development of professional sports that undoubtedly never entered into the thinking of the makers of *The Last Dance*. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the supposed "final triumph" of capitalism, prematurely proclaimed, created an especially unsavoury atmosphere in the 1990s. American sports figures such as Jordan, through no fault of their own, played a role in reaffirming and re-branding of US "greatness" and "power" around the world.

At the same time, such personalities could only play such an oversized role because of the growing moral and cultural vacuum at the center of American society. As the WSWS noted following Jordan's final retirement in 1999, it had been 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?"

The Last Dance, in other words, covers a period in which sports gained an unhealthy, outsized influence in society and culture, with a corresponding rise in its business potential. Jordan's career arc traces this process clearly in the National Basketball Association (NBA), as corporate executives identified basketball players as potential pitchmen for all sorts of products. Advertising fueled a rampant consumerism over products such as the expensive Air Jordan. Fights over the possession of such sneakers led to violence and even death.

Jordan and certain other athletes became fabulously wealthy, of course, with much of that money coming from endorsements off the court. In the documentary, Jordan defends his notorious gambling habit that would see him wager hundreds of thousands of dollars over golf games. This is seen as not unreasonable, since throwing away vast sums of money barely put a dent in his pocketbook.

The documentary mini-series revisits the comments made by Jordan in 1990 regarding the North Carolina US Senate race between the incumbent, ultra-reactionary Republican Jesse Helms, and Democrat Harvey Gantt. Jordan, a native of the state, was asked to give an endorsement of Gantt, a black former mayor of Charlotte. He declined, and later justified his decision with the remark that "Republicans buy sneakers too"—a statement Jordan long denied making, but admitted to in the documentary.

The liberal left made a great fuss about this at the time,

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and still does, as though a Jordan endorsement of Gantt would have put him in the company of the angels.

Certainly Jordan was no John Carlos or Muhammad Ali, who were prepared to make sacrifices for their principles, but the complaints about the Bulls star by such pseudo-left, middle class forces are merely attempts to reinforce the stranglehold of the Democratic Party.

The Democrats have shifted even further to the right since 1990, and part of that shift takes the form of elevating minorities to public office. Former NBA stars themselves have featured in this process, including Dave Bing, who as mayor of Detroit helped preside over the city's further decline, and former Sacramento mayor Kevin Johnson, closely associated with efforts to privatize education.

There was and is a certain nervousness about Jordan because his unabashed careerism threatened to undermine his own popularity and the continued usefulness of sports figures as "role models" for impoverished youth. Thus, the series' makers felt obliged to bring on former president Barack Obama to voice mild criticism, while essentially endorsing Jordan's drive for self-enrichment. "You would have wanted to see Michael push harder on that [the North Carolina Senate race]," Obama says. "On the other hand, he was still trying to figure out, 'How am I managing this image?'"

Gantt has also come to recognize the primacy of Jordan's financial concerns. He was quoted earlier this year by *Time* defending Jordan, saying the NBA star was merely "trying to build a brand."

While there is nothing to suggest an endorsement of a candidate of one of the country's two big business parties would have any serious ramifications for Jordan, wading into more radical politics can produce a backlash for athletes. One of Jordan's teammates at the time, Craig Hodges, was known for his outspoken views, and unsuccessfully tried to persuade Jordan and fellow star Magic Johnson to lead a boycott of the 1991 NBA Finals to protest the police assault on motorist Rodney King.

Hodges later presented a petition to President George H.W. Bush when the champion Bulls visited the White House shortly thereafter. Despite his skills as one the league's preeminent shooters, Hodges was out of a job within a year and never played in the league again.

In 2003, Washington Wizards center/power forward Etan Thomas tried to gather support among his fellow NBA players against the looming invasion of Iraq, but was told repeatedly that he risked suffering the same fate as Hodges.

In recent years, many athletes have protested the spate of police murders of unarmed African Americans. Despite the effort of NFL owners to block Colin Kaepernick from playing football, fellow players have taken up his cause in the NFL and the other major sports leagues.

The NFL has recently backtracked, at least in part, from its previous hostile stance on anthem protests, in the face of the upheavals following the murder of George Floyd. This suggests that league officials regard the protests, which they present as limited to racial matters, as a means by which they can rehabilitate their image without adversely affecting their interests. There are reports that Kaepernick himself will be offered a job before the next season opens.

Jordan, for his part, has previously spoken in support of kneeling in protest and has recently promised millions of dollars "to ensuring racial equality" over the next ten years. He previously tried to improve his image by endorsing former Senator and NBA star Bill Bradley over Al Gore for the 2000 Democratic presidential nomination, as well as by donating money to Gantt in his second unsuccessful attempt to unseat Helms, in 1996. His most prominent endorsement, however, has been reserved for Obama, under whom social inequality and the militarization of the police only accelerated.

That Michael Jordan's athletic achievement continues to resonate with the public nearly two decades since his heyday indicates the degree to which he mastered his sport. It also points, however, to the ongoing worship of individualism and the relentless effort to divert young people from taking up a political and social struggle against the existing order.

As the *WSWS* wrote on the occasion of Jordan's second retirement from basketball in 1999:

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.

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