

# how the **GOAT** was built

6 LIFE LESSONS FROM  
THE 1996 CHICAGO BULLS  
by Jack M Silverstein

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## Prologue, October of 1995:

**“...not that far from being a good team”**

You want to know the great unspoken truth of the mythic 72-10 Chicago Bulls season? No one knew it was coming. Not even Phil Jackson.

On Sunday, Oct. 1, 1995, [the day the Chicago Tribune ran an interview with the Bulls head coach](#) in which he said the team was “a power player away from winning 60 games,” Jackson and general manager Jerry Krause were at the Berto Center meeting with the power player who would soon help the Bulls win 70 games — Dennis Rodman.

These were desperate times. In May, the Bulls were knocked out of the playoffs by the Orlando Magic, who were powered not just by their stars Shaq and Penny but by Horace Grant, the ex-Bulls power forward who returned to Chicago to haunt our dreams before being carried into the sunset and off the U.C. floor. Our only Grant antidote was Toni Kukoc, a point guard who happened to be 6-11, and not-long-for-this-team Corie Blount.

The Bulls spent the summer chasing practically every power forward in the league to no avail. Jackson wanted the Nets’ Derrick Coleman. Michael Jordan wanted Coleman’s teammate Jayson Williams, [whom he tried to recruit in June at a New York night club](#). Charles Oakley and Anthony Mason of the Knicks, Christian Laettner of the Timberwolves, Otis Thorpe of the Trail Blazers — all were considered.

The Bulls needed one of them. That much was known. Without a new power forward, Jackson told the Tribune's Sam Smith, the team would win only 50 games, a three-game improvement from 1995 but not enough to catch the reigning Eastern Conference-champion Magic.

"We have reason to believe we can beat this team," Jackson told Smith. The best he could say about the Bulls was that they were "not that far away from being a good team."

That the soon-to-be 72-10 Bulls were, by their coach's admission, merely approaching being "a good team" as late as October shows how uncertain life became for the franchise between the 1993 Finals and the 1995-96 preseason. The team faced a crossroads after its second-round loss to Orlando. Despite averaging a series-best 31 points, Jordan's lasting image from that series was not as the GOAT but as the goat, getting his pocket picked by Nick Anderson in the final seconds of Game 1, leading to a three-point loss.

After missing one-and-a-half NBA seasons while playing minor league baseball and playing only the final 17 regular season games, Jordan's rust showed.

"I knew he was behind me, but I didn't know which way," a confused Jordan said after the game. "I misjudged him and he slapped the ball away."

During the offseason, the team's leaders took an I'll-stay-if-you-stay approach. Jordan would return [so long as Scottie Pippen and Phil Jackson did too](#). Pippen would return but management wouldn't promise he'd be back. Jackson was only two months removed from telling management he would only renew his contract after it expired in 1996 if they blew up the roster, Pippen included.

Now all three were pinning their championship hopes on Rodman, their former Pistons nemesis. Rodman fit perfectly — after all, he and all his new teammates came with question marks. Could Mike return to MVP levels? Could Scottie focus on hoops after consecutive seasons in which he was nearly traded? Could Kukoc handle returning to the bench? Could Ron Harper re-invent himself as a defensive stopper? Could Luc Longley be the starting center?

In the years that followed, folks perpetuated the notion that "If MJ didn't retire, we would have won eight straight." Don't believe the hype. The Bulls needed those "gap years" to reach their 1996-1998 zenith — a 28-month period that included the very necessary retirement of the game's greatest player, a flurry of near-trades of the team's second best player, a masterful manipulation of the expansion draft, the rulings of a federal judge, and Phil Jackson's vision of "a new breed of championship team" that paved the way for the 2015 and 2016 Golden State Warriors.

I feel a kindred spirit to these Warriors. They are a virtuosity, the perfect torchbearers for our beloved champion Bulls — specifically the second three-peat, a wholly different team than the first. The first group captured the hoops nation's attention. The second captured its imagination.

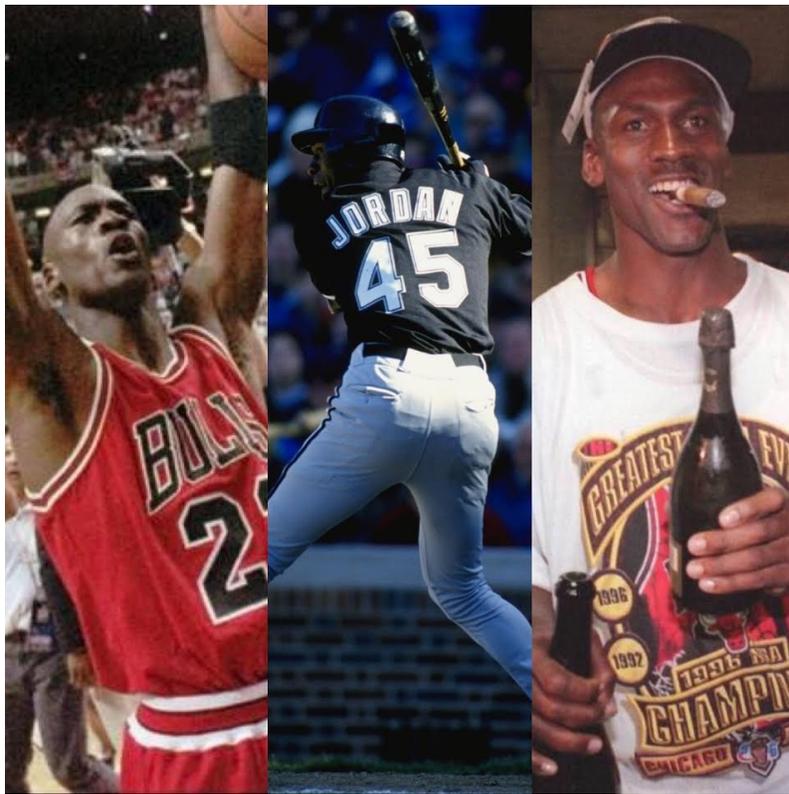
Twenty years later, the first group is recalled with fondness and pride. The second group is revered, mythologized, dissected, beloved.

There's a lesson to be learned here! Six, actually. And that's what you're about to read: the six life lessons from the 1996 Chicago Bulls. By studying the principles behind the construction of the 20-year undisputed belt holder for Greatest Team of All Time, we find valuable insights into success and greatness — lessons we can apply in our own pursuits.

Looking back on that two-year title gap, the fact that the 1996 Bulls were in a position to win 60 games, let alone 70, is one of the great sports miracles of all time. On February 22, 1995, the Bulls were a game under .500, 6th in the East, their former MVP was playing minor league baseball, and their current near-MVP wanted to be traded.

On February 22, 1996, the team was a league-best 48-5, an NBA record for wins after 53 games, en route to a fourth — and eventually sixth — NBA title.

And it never would have happened if Michael Jordan didn't retire.



## LESSON 1

**If your head approves, follow your heart  
(even if that means leaving your perch atop the NBA  
to play minor league baseball)**

“I think he had to get away from everything. It all overwhelmed him.”

“I think he had gotten so tired of the hype and so tired of the media that he wanted to find a place where he could play and really just have fun.”

“I think Mike is doing this just so he can get away from the insanity of pro basketball.”

“Maybe Mike’s doing this because he just wants to be a player again.”

“Here’s a guy, the greatest of all times, letting nothing stand in the way of what he loves to do, and that’s just play \_\_\_\_\_.”

--- Marv Albert, Ahmad Rashad, David Robinson, Harold Miner, and John Thompson, February 1994

The best evidence that Michael Jordan’s 1993 retirement and subsequent short-lived baseball career was on the level and NOT a secret NBA suspension due to gambling, or an NBA

marketing ploy to develop new stars in the Jordan vacuum, or any other theory, is simple: There's no evidence.

"It's not possible to keep a secret in the NBA," Sam Smith said in the 2010 ESPN documentary about MJ's time in baseball, "Jordan Rides The Bus." "So this notion that somehow the NBA suspended the greatest player in the history of the NBA — forced him out of the game — and now, almost 20 years later, nobody still knows about this, is just ludicrous."

The film's director Ron Shelton [phrased it to Deadspin quite similarly](#): "Every journalist I talked to said, 'Don't you realize, Ron? ... 'We went down there, we spent a *year* looking for the smoking gun! We would have won the Pulitzer!'"

To me, as much as certain elements of certain theories about "the real reason MJ retired" sound plausible, that no actual proof has ever been found tells me the whole story.

Was Jordan suspended for gambling? The most realistic rumors I've heard over the years are not that he was suspended because of private gambling, i.e. golf and card games, but because he was gambling [on pro sports](#), [possibly the NBA](#), possibly his own games, possibly fixing games. If any of those scenarios were true, especially the latter two, would the NBA suspend him and let him return? And seriously, would NOBODY find out? Seems unlikely.

Additionally, there were [Nike's Johnny Kilroy commercials](#) starting in January 1994 in which NBA stars, basketball media, and other celebrities speculated that Jordan "faked his retirement" to play semi-pro and minor league basketball under various aliases. The quotes above — from Marv, Ahmad, the Admiral, and everyone else — are actually from one of the Kilroy commercials referring to Jordan in disguise in semi-pro hoops, but the quotes allow for the double meaning of Jordan playing minor league baseball. Incredibly, at least according to the dates on the clip, that commercial, the third in the series, aired February 7, 1994, the day MJ signed his minor league contract.

What's supremely odd about these commercials is that along with the playful notion of Jordan as Kilroy — a funny gag on its own — actors in the spots tease the actual MJ suspension conspiracy theory. In the first commercial from January 1994, narrator Steve Martin says the only conclusion to speculation that "Kilroy is Jordan" is that "Michael Jordan, the greatest basketball player of all time, is letting nothing stand in the way of what he loves to do."

That line ("letting nothing stand in the way") coyly suggests his retirement was not his choice. It's repeated in commercial #3 by Coach Thompson.

Let's say Jordan actually WAS secretly suspended by the NBA for gambling — and I'm not even talking about point shaving, fixing games, betting on his games, or even on the NBA, but the more mainstream version, that the league was letting the heat around his associations with, in his words, "goons," and other unsavory issues, die down. Would he really make a commercial joking about it, spurring fans, critics, reporters, and anyone else to search harder for proof? That

would be the ballsiest and most reckless response possible to a legitimate threat to legacy and livelihood.

The theory posited in [this Uproxx article from 2014](#) seems more plausible: that Jordan's 1993 retirement was actually a marketing ploy by Jordan and the league. Jordan would get what he wanted: to take a break from basketball AND play baseball. And the NBA would get to rebuild league suspense after three straight Bulls titles, develop new stars in the Jordan vacuum, and then re-insert Jordan into the mix like Ulysses returning home to fend off suitors to his beloved wife/championships.

Yet Jordan was talking about retirement as early as 1991. Sam Smith reported on MJ's retirement thoughts in 1992's "The Jordan Rules." By the middle of the 1992-93 season, he'd pretty much made up his mind about retiring at the end of that season, and that was before the May 1993 [Atlantic City gambling story](#), [the Richard Esquinas book](#), and his father's murder.

Those facts seal it for me. If someone has hard evidence that MJ was suspended, obviously I'm all ears. But in "The Mystery of Michael Jordan's First Retirement," I buy the simplest explanation of all: he needed a break. He said it repeatedly during that era.

He even told his teammates.

"And not just one night," Jordan told sportswriter Melissa Isaacson in her 1994 book "Transition Game." "We'd have a couple of beers after the game and they'd be complaining about this or that, pointing fingers as they liked to do, and I'd say, 'Man, you don't know how good you have it. You watch, I'm not going to be around here much longer. I think this is going to be my last year.' And they'd say, 'Sure MJ, sure.' ... I kept saying it. Not once, not twice, but three or four times. I could sense they didn't believe me. 'Sure MJ, you're either pissed off or you've been drinking.'"

What's fascinating about Isaacson's book is that it was published while Jordan was still playing baseball — that is, without the benefit of hindsight. For instance, Isaacson asked Jordan if he ever considered simply taking a sabbatical, a notion broached regularly now.

"I never would do that and Jerry Reinsdorf never suggested it," Jordan told her about the Bulls chairman. Phil Jackson, on the other hand, did ask Jordan to consider taking a break rather than retiring.

"No, this is it," Jordan recalled telling his coach. "I want to do it now because I don't want it to linger on in my mind ... and I don't want you to have hope (of a comeback) in the back of your mind when actually there's no hope."

Four months and one day after his retirement, Jordan threw the sports world another curveball, signing a minor league contract with the Chicago White Sox, the baseball team owned by

Reinsdorf, (who declined an interview request for this story). Jordan played 17 spring training games for the Sox and was optioned to the Double-A Birmingham Barons.

“He was having a hard time with basketball,” said Terry Francona, Jordan’s manager with the Barons and future Boston Red Sox skipper, [in 2013](#). “He said he’d show up to the arena, he’d put his headphones on, he’d play the game, answer the media and leave. To this day, I think for that one year, I think trying to get a hit in Memphis or Birmingham meant as much to him as what the NBA used to.”

## **But wait — didn’t MJ totally embarrass himself as a baseball player?**

For fans who believe Jordan’s baseball career was a placeholder while the NBA gambling heat cooled, his .202 batting average with the Barons is cited as proof of his diamond ineptitude. But there are three problems with that. The first is that the context is wrong. You can’t compare MJ’s .202 to the so-called “good average” .300. [As Baseball Reference points out](#), the Barons as a team hit .248 “in a park that typically had low averages.”

In fact, two of Jordan’s teammates who made the majors in 1995 — catcher Chris Tremie and 2nd baseman Doug Brady — hit .225 and .248, respectively, in Birmingham in 1994.

The second was that baseball insiders viewed Jordan’s .202 average not with cynicism but with awe: how could this 31-year-old *basketball player* pick up a bat for the first time in more than a decade and actually hit .202 in Double-A ball?

The final problem is that .202 represents a stunted, incomplete sample set. In late March 1994, when *Sports Illustrated* ran its ill-conceived cover story (famous for a cover title “Bag it Michael” and an inside caption “Err Jordan”), Jordan was maligned for hitting under .200, the so-called “Mendoza Line,” which Jordan joked might be renamed “the Jordan Line.”

“If Michael keeps hitting .200,” Charles Barkley said in June of ’94, “he’ll be back here (in the NBA) next year.”

We’ll never know, because Jordan *didn’t* keep hitting .200. He hit .260 over the season’s final month, raised his average to .200 after his first 3-hit game of the season, and eventually reached .202 in 436 total at bats.

“This is like the fourth quarter for me,” [Jordan said in August](#), referring to the season’s stretch run. “This is when I want to be my best.”

Jordan then went to the Scottsdale Scorpions in October and hit .252 in the Arizona Fall League, a league Francona characterized as “probably a notch above Class Double A.” One of Jordan’s teammates in Scottsdale was future Red Sox All-Star Nomar Garciaparra who in 1995 made his Double-A debut and hit .267, 65 points better than Jordan’s “laughable” .202. Not to

mention that Garciaparra was 10 years younger than Jordan and fresh off a celebrated career at Georgia Tech, plus had a profile big enough in high school that he was drafted by the Brewers.

The biggest clue about Jordan's seriousness to stay in baseball until he made the Bigs came in July 1994 when he played confidante to SuperSonics coach and fellow North Carolina alumnus George Karl, advising Karl to pull the trigger on a trade for Scottie Pippen. On the table was Pippen and the #21 pick for Shawn Kemp, Ricky Pierce, and the #11 pick, which the Bulls hoped to use on Temple guard Eddie Jones. (He went #10.)

Seattle pulled out when [owner Barry Ackerly panicked](#), in part because Sonics fans complained in droves on local radio. Karl pushed Ackerly to do the trade regardless, largely due to Jordan's guidance.

"You'll be getting the better of the deal," [Jordan told Karl](#), assuring him that a Pippen-Payton partnership in Seattle would win the Sonics a championship. This of course suggests Jordan was serious about remaining in baseball rather than making it a pre-determined hoops hiatus, because he wouldn't offer his assistance to aid a trade that would eliminate his best teammate.

In 2010 [Jordan told ESPN's J.A. Adande](#) that he would have "probably not" come back to the Bulls in 1995 with Kemp instead of Pippen. That statement supports the theory that Jordan had no immediate plans to return to the Bulls and was looking out for Pippen's best interest.

Even with Phil Jackson speculating that Jordan would ultimately treat baseball like a long vacation from which one returns to work, a comeback at this time seemed, [as Sam Smith wrote](#), "unlikely." The day after he pushed Seattle to acquire Pippen, Jordan told reporters he didn't see himself returning to hoops any time in the "near future" or even the "far future," adding that if pushed to lean one way or the other, he was willing to say, [on the record](#): "I will never play basketball again, except recreationally."

Yet a baseball work stoppage was looming. On August 12, the strike began. Jordan was approved for the Scorpions two weeks later, hit .252 with Scottsdale in 123 at bats, and then was promoted to Nashville for 1995.

That was the good news. The bad news were the folks suggesting Jordan was being fast tracked to the Bigs as a hedge during the strike against lost revenue. This was the last thing Jordan wanted. He'd been vocal about not wanting to earn a spot on the Sox roster as a replacement player, and equally adamant that he did not wish to be used by either the players or the owners as a bargaining chip.

"A lot of teams were willing to put me on their 25-man roster," Jordan told Isaacson. "But I knew it wasn't genuine. I knew it was only a business decision and not a baseball decision."

Even White Sox GM Ron Schueler couldn't talk about Jordan's career without sounding like a man [trying to convince himself of a truth he doesn't yet believe](#). And certainly the economic

impact Jordan had on the minor league system was unprecedented: the Barons set [a home attendance record](#) with 467,867 fans, and both the Southern League (where the Barons played) and the Fall League (where the Scorpions played) set season ticket-sales records.

Speculation about any non-merit-based advancement is irrelevant, though, compared to the hard facts of Jordan's steady improvement and everything we know about his will and work ethic.

Jordan came back to the NBA twice in his life and played until he was 40, so I suspect he would have returned to hoops eventually. Indeed, throughout his retirement Jordan contacted friends in the league — including B.J. Armstrong and Joe Dumars — to pick their brains on young players. Sam Smith's "Second Coming" quotes Jordan talking to reporters in Birmingham during the spring of 1994 about the possibility of returning to the NBA:

"Yes, once in awhile I think, 'What if I was still there?' But it's more in the context of the young guys," Jordan said. "I've proved my point with the Barkleys and Drexlers. It would have to be a shot at the (Anfernee) Hardaways and the Webbers. I'd like to teach those rookies a lesson."

But there were no indications in the fall of 1994 that he would be back in the Bulls starting lineup within four months.

That's where the strike comes in, along with my favorite conspiracy theory that NO ONE talks about: the possibility that Jerry Reinsdorf was partially motivated to be hard on the baseball players' union to force his best athletic asset back to the place where said asset was most valuable.

NOW...

Everything on the record says that the sequence moving from the threat of minor league strikebreakers to Jordan leaving baseball and returning to the Bulls was — from the NBA's perspective — a fortuitous turn of events.

All I'm saying is that in a world where sports fans slobber up half-baked conspiracy theories like drunk teenagers at 3 a.m. who don't want to wait for the Tombstone to finish cooking, a world where a good percentage of hoops fans actually believe that Michael Jordan's baseball retirement was a secret gambling suspension from the NBA that no reporter has ever uncovered and no thirsty witness has ever leaked — in THAT world, it's odd to me that no one wonders about the circumstances around Jordan, Reinsdorf, and the strike.

Because we clearly have four facts about Reinsdorf and Jordan which, taken in concert, could plausibly point to a particular conclusion, were one so inclined to believe it:

1. Reinsdorf was paying MJ his hoops salary ([\\$4 million](#)) to play minor league baseball.

2. Reinsdorf was probably just as competitive as Jordan and viewed winning championships as the primary purpose of owning a team.
3. Reinsdorf surely knew about Jordan's insistence on reaching the majors on his merits.
4. Reinsdorf was [popularly credited](#) as the baseball owner who took the hardest line against the players' union.

In the end, the strike left Jordan with no appealing baseball options. Rather than report to Nashville, he called Reinsdorf in March and said he was heading home to Chicago. In "Michael Jordan, The Life," author Roland Lazenby reported Reinsdorf trying to talk Jordan out of leaving the White Sox organization, telling Jordan he was "quitting baseball for the wrong reasons."

So fine, perhaps there's no conspiracy. Yet conspiracy or not, the impact of the strike on Jordan is inarguable.

"If it wasn't for the baseball strike," Curtis Polk — a former colleague of Jordan's agent David Falk — [told Bleacher Report last year](#), "I'm not sure he would've come back (to basketball) at that time, or ever."

Reinsdorf was even more definitive in [a USA Today interview](#) in 2014: "I think he would have definitely given it one more year if not for the strike."

"I didn't plan to come back," [Jordan said in '96](#). "And in some ways that was probably good, because I fixed my mind away from the game. I totally forgot about the game. And then once I got a taste of it again it was a different kind of taste — a taste that I'd been looking for for so long."



## LESSON 2

### **Don't be afraid to push your limits — or to find peace and excellence within them**

The championship Bulls don't work without Scottie Pippen. So naturally the Bulls tried to trade him approximately a bajillion times between 1994 and 1998. In telling the story of the 1996 Bulls — and gleaning from that story wisdom for our own lives and pursuits — two abandoned Pippen trades stand out. Incredibly, both failed because the OTHER team balked.

The first was the one between the Bulls and SuperSonics on the eve of the 1994 draft, the Pippen-for-Kemp deal that failed when Seattle got cold feet.

The second was in February 1995, when [the Clippers tried to acquire Pippen](#) at a time when he was dead set on leaving.

“I don't want to be here (with the Bulls) the rest of the season,” [Pippen said in early February](#). “I'm hoping teams are thinking about me. I'm still ready to get out of here. I'm looking for a different place, a different team, a different perspective on my career. I've got 18 days to go (to the February 23 trading deadline). The countdown is on. Just say I'm showcasing myself out here.”

The Clips put a helluva deal on the table: L.A.'s next two number one picks, along with the right to swap picks the following two seasons. That would have given the Bulls the #2 pick in 1995

(L.A. took Antonio McDyess; Jerry Stackhouse, Rasheed Wallace, and Kevin Garnett were the next three picks) plus L.A.'s top pick in 1996.

Unfortunately for the Clippers, Pippen was developing a bond with new Bull and ex-Clipper Ron Harper, who was only too eager to explain the shortcomings of both Clippers management and the fan base, a team he hated so much that he was suspended one game the season before [for likening his time there to a jail stint](#).

The Clippers wanted assurances that Pippen would come to the team rather than hold out. He would make no such guarantee. The trade fell through.

Eight days later, Jordan quit baseball. So the Pippen non-trade to the Clippers was crucial because by the summer of 1995 Jordan was telling management he would not stay past the end of his contract in 1996 without Pippen.

As a Bulls fan obsessed with the title years, I've always made a point of referring to those teams not as "Jordan's Bulls" but as "Jordan and Pippen's Bulls." This might seem sentimental, or flat-out wrong, but trust me: we don't get six rings without both guys.

Or fine, don't trust me. Trust him:

"I just don't see how you would get equal value for a player like Scottie Pippen," [Jordan said](#) after the 1995 loss to Orlando as rumors swirled about a possible Pippen trade. "Maybe for a Hakeem Olajuwon, and I'm not even sure you would want to do that."

Pippen's value strictly as a player was obvious: he was the league's best perimeter defender and a 20-point scorer who in 1995 became the second player ever to lead his team in total points, rebounds, assists, steals, and blocks. (Dave Cowens did it in 1978, followed by Pip, KG in 2003, and LeBron in 2009.) Pippen finished in the top 3 in VORP in both 1994 and 1995 (only David Robinson did as well), and in 1995 led the league in defensive rating, the shortest player to do so between the NBA-ABA merger of 1976 and Kawhi Leonard in 2015.

Specifically for the '96 Bulls though, and the whole second three-peat, Pippen's value extended beyond the court. In the Smith Q&A, Jackson called Pippen "the most unselfish superstar in the game of basketball."

Wrote Bill Wennington in his 2004 memoir "Bill Wennington's Tales From the Bulls Hardwood": "As a teammate, you could not ask for anyone better than Scottie, and that includes Michael."

Wennington recalls one film session in which Jackson jumped on Wennington for committing a Bulls defensive sin: double-teaming in the post. Wennington was playing power forward next to Luc Longley, and Pippen — also on the court — told Wennington to double despite Jackson's standing order to the contrary.

When Jackson let Wennington have it, Pippen told Phil that he, Scottie, gave Wennington the instruction.

“That sort of thing didn’t happen just once,” Wennington wrote. “It happened several times, and not just with me, but with all the players on the team. ... He had taken the role of a leader on the floor, and he was defending his decisions to Phil in our film meeting.”

**“Poor Scottie. I kept telling him it’s not easy being me.”**

**— Michael Jordan**

More than talent, the Bulls were powered by strategy and work ethic — specifically from Jordan, who during the second three-peat played all 246 regular season games, all 59 postseason games, three All-Star games, and 23 of 24 preseason games, finally missing his sixth preseason game in 1998 with an ingrown toenail.

“(Jordan’s) competitive spirit ignites that ‘We will not lose’ attitude that he’s always brought to the game,” [Jackson said on Chicago Tonight](#) on the eve of the 1996 season. “But I think sharing it with Pippen every day in kind of a co-leadership role has elevated Scottie into even a greater player than he’s ever been.”

“The best thing for Scottie was when I left,” [Jordan said in 1996](#). “He understands what I’ve gone through and what he’s going through. It’s not an easy task. It’s a tough responsibility. And for years I was able to take some of that light away from him. When I walked away, he saw that light in a better situation including with himself. And it’s helped him grow.”

Pippen’s 1994 is, perhaps, best remembered for his refusal to play the final 1.8 seconds of Game 3 of the team’s playoff series with New York because Jackson asked Pippen to inbound the ball to Kukoc rather than take the shot.

“Poor Scottie,” the baseball-playing Jordan told reporters in Birmingham afterward. “I kept telling him it’s not easy being me. Now he knows.”

Jordan spoke at length with Isaacson about how the Pippen/Kukoc dynamic played out during the season and then in that game. When Jordan told teammates he was retiring — the morning of his press conference — he was surprised by how hard the news hit Kukoc, which he called “touching.”

“Toni was bawling like a kid and I didn’t even know him that well,” Jordan said. “In that one instance, I wish I could have played, just so I could have taught him and helped him learn the game.”

That task fell to Pippen. From watching both games and practices, Jordan thought Pippen was harsh.

“Playing with Toni, I would have been more sympathetic, with all the things he had to adjust to, than Scottie was,” Jordan told Isaacson. “Scottie was a little bit impatient. As much as he was trying to help him, the public perception of him during games was the yelling. No one wants to be yelled at on the court.”

(And here I’ll just add that I could literally quote this entire chapter in Isaacson’s book — it’s that good — but I won’t to save time. [You should really seek it out.](#))

Anyhow, take from that what you will from Jordan, a notorious motivational-berater of teammates, but MJ’s other observation about Kukoc also applied to everything that played out in those 1.8 seconds.

“One thing I did see in (Kukoc) was that he was the only guy out there with the confidence to take the game-winning shot,” Jordan told Isaacson. “He didn’t worry about the pros and cons. He felt, ‘If I miss it, so what?’ He had that confidence. And to take those shots, that’s how you’ve got to think.”

When the 1.8 seconds went down, Jordan was in uniform with the Barons for a game in Orlando. He was in the bathroom, with someone outside yelling to him the play-by-play. The Bulls were tied with 1.8 seconds to go, Jordan was told.

“I told them, ‘You don’t have to tell me. Kukoc is going to take the shot and they’re going to win,’” Jordan said. “I predicted the whole scenario.”

Afterward, it was Jordan who, better than anyone, immediately empathized with Pippen and intuited the blowback to come.

“All your greater players have that desire to want the last shot,” he told Isaacson. “But if that’s what he felt, that was certainly not the most opportune time to do that. You wait until after the game.”

If the play didn’t work, Jordan said, Pippen’s credibility would be restored by the press, which would pick apart the coaching decision.

“Scottie didn’t understand that and I didn’t have the chance to teach him,” Jordan said. “He jumped the gun and you can’t do that, especially not in a playoff game. And unfortunately, he’s going to be criticized the rest of his life for that. That’s the kind of situation that sticks with you.”

And it did — just not with teammates and coaches. They quickly moved past the error, with many expressing sympathy for Pippen in his moment of need. Jackson’s explanation for the team’s failure to win a championship in 1994 wasn’t Pippen’s leadership, but that “we didn’t have a Scottie Pippen behind a Michael Jordan,” adding that “Scottie had no one like himself to step up behind his effort.”

The lasting emotions toward Pippen from his 1994 teammates were gratitude and respect.

“He had a phenomenal year,” John Paxson [told ESPN in 2010](#). “To those of us who were teammates, (1994) showed what kind of teammate he was. He wasn’t out there to try to prove to people that he could score 30. For Scottie, it was about winning.”

**“I want you to know you will always be in my heart.”**  
**— Scottie Pippen**

Chuck Daly once described Pippen as a “fill in the blanks” player, a trait he employed in 1996 both on the floor and in the locker room. Pippen was the entry point into the team’s three-pointed leadership structure that he shared with Jackson and Jordan, the bridge who helped the superstar relate to the journeymen and the journeymen relate to the superstar.

Jordan’s attitude toward teammates was considerably more welcoming during the second three-peat than the first, yet he would still reprimand them in practice or during games, challenging their ability and work ethic in hopes of helping them reach hoops enlightenment. In “Second Coming,” Smith writes about Jordan in the ‘95 playoffs driving for an inside bucket instead of passing to open teammates on the wings. Jackson told him to pass next time.

“You don’t see what I’m looking at,” Jordan told him.

The inherent challenge of being Michael Jordan’s teammate was that Jordan was the game’s best player AND the smartest AND the most demanding. Wennington remembers Jordan telling his new teammates during training camp of the ‘96 season to “Jump on the cape and hold on tight because I am going to try to buck you off.”

The challenge wasn’t just that Jordan did not tolerate behavior he deemed lazy. It was that he could not comprehend its cause or accept its legitimacy. Wennington recalled a game when Jordan did not pass to Luc Longley, despite the natural flow of the triangle offense dictating that the pass be made.

Jackson called timeout and told Jordan to pass to Longley. He refused, saying Longley already missed two of his passes. At a meeting in practice the next day, Jackson reiterated.

“Michael,” Wennington recalls Longley saying, “I am trying my hardest.”

“Luc, you are not,” Jordan said. “You are not catching the ball. If I pass you the ball, you have to catch the ball.”

This exchange shines a different light on MJ’s famous creed, “I can’t accept not trying.” To Jordan, “trying” equaled executing. Failure to execute WAS the failure, NOT failure to try. Even

during Jordan's calmer days during the second three-peat, the collective force of his drive, will, bluntness, fame, and myth challenged teammates to get better or get out.

"With Michael, there's no forgiveness when you miss," Steve Kerr told Sam Smith for Smith's 2014 oral history of Jordan, "There Is No Next." "That was the intimidating part. Scottie was the exact opposite. If he passed to you and you missed, he would pat you on the head and say, 'That's alright. I'm gonna pass it to you again next time.' Whereas Michael would look at you like: 'You gotta make the fucking shot.'"

If instead of Pippen, it was Jordan who had told Wennington to double the post, and Jackson was then killing Wennington in the film session, "(Jordan) would let you burn under the coach's examination and grilling and see what you would say in your own defense," Wennington wrote. "For Michael, it was a test of our willingness to stand up for ourselves. ... Scottie didn't test us the same way."

Pippen's game epitomized Jackson's philosophy for players to "always be in the offense." Yes, he initially expressed excitement when Jordan retired, with [Isaacson relaying a story](#) of Pippen in the locker room in late October 1993 announcing to no one, "Michael, I love you, but I'm glad to see you go."

Two years later, carrying both the strength and the scars from being The Man, he told ESPN that [having Jordan back made him "comfortable."](#)

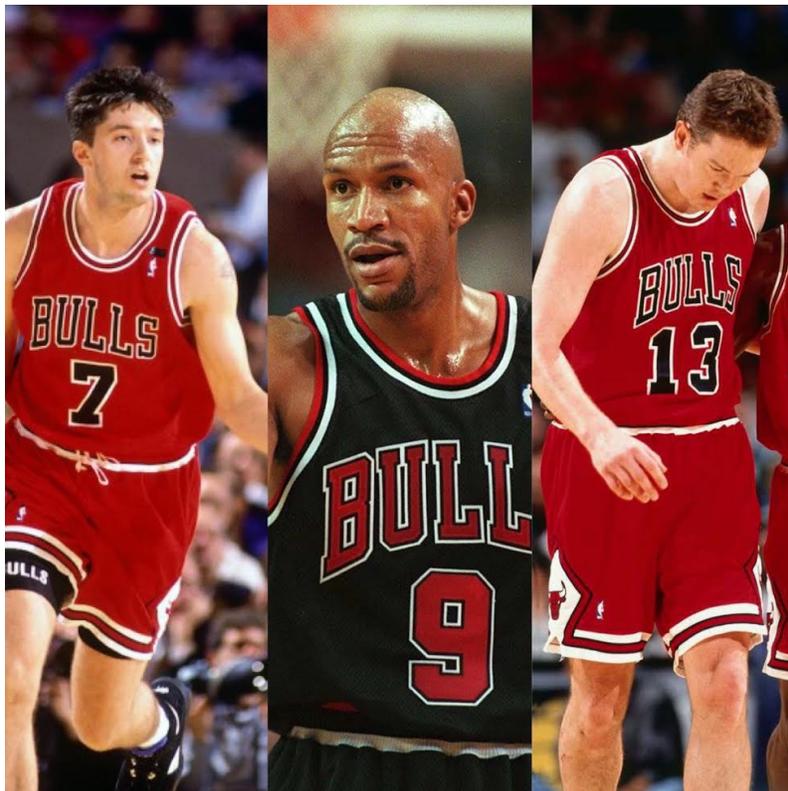
"Everyone enjoys the spotlight — being the leader, being the go-to guy," Pippen said. "But it's a lot of fun when you've got a good group of thoroughbreds you can go to as well, and then you can pick your places."

Asked if he wanted to "be like Mike," his response was telling: "No. I want to be like Scottie," he said. "That's all I can be and that's all I ever want to be."

Today, MJ's 2009 Hall of Fame speech is exceptionally well known, not just because it launched the "Crying Jordan" meme but because he used the moment to settle scores and re-coat layers of time-cracked trash talk.

Less memorable but equally insightful was Pippen's Hall of Fame speech one year later, in which he asked his former teammates in the audience to stand, "[so that I can recognize you.](#)" Seven of them stood, including five from 1996-1998 and one more, Pete Myers, from 1994. Pippen looked lovingly at the players to whom Jordan always called "my supporting cast."

"I really appreciate playing with you guys," Pippen told them, a smile beaming from his face that was returned by his smitten teammates. "I want you to know you will always be in my heart."



### LESSON 3

## Surround yourself with humble talent for a unified mission

The biggest fallacy about the 1990s Bulls is that they won six championships. That is, that one team won six.

In reality, two teams won three.

I've always found the 28 months between the '93 Finals and the '96 season one of the most interesting periods of Chicago sports history. In that time, Jerry Krause transformed one three-peat team into another.

	1993 Finals	1996 Finals
PG	B.J. Armstrong	Ron Harper
SG		Michael Jordan
SF		Scottie Pippen
PF	Horace Grant	Dennis Rodman
C	Bill Cartwright	Luc Longley
6	Scott Williams, C/PF	Toni Kukoc, SF
7	John Paxson, G	Steve Kerr, G
8	Stacey King, F/C	Bill Wennington, C
9	Trent Tucker, SG	Jud Buechler, F/G

10	Will Perdue, C	Randy Brown, G
11	Rodney McCray, SF	John Salley, PF/C
12	Darrell Walker, G	James Edwards, C

Where you stand on the “Which team would win, first three-peat or second three-peat?” question depends on three factors: which MJ you think was better, which Scottie you think was better, and the other 10.

And while a strong case can be made for the first three-peat (better defensive center, more shooters, a younger roster, more down-low muscle men, traditional low-post scoring), I pick the second three-peat, and not because that group won 18 more regular season games. I pick them because of what I believe to be the main cause of that 18-win bump: hierarchy.

## Rebuilding the totem pole

In Jackson’s 2013 memoir “Eleven Rings,” Jackson reprinted two sets of portraits he commissioned by Chicago artist Tim Anderson. The first were the nine guys on all three teams from the first three-peat. The second were the 10 guys on all three teams from the second three-peat. Jackson called them his [“totem poles.”](#)

They are wonderful portraits. Yet when I first saw them, one thing jumped out at me. In the first set, every player is looking on an angle — off-screen, as it were. In the second set, every player is looking straight into the eyes of the viewer.

The difference wasn’t intentional. For the first set, Anderson snapped Polaroids of the players during broadcasts, largely when they were at the foul line. For the second set, “I was just trying to get everybody to look like they look, with their attitude,” Anderson told me.

Still, the unity in vision and purpose depicted in those portraits is, to me, the perfect image of the second three-peat. On the first three-peat, Scottie wanted to be Mike and Horace wanted to be Scottie and Stacey wanted to be Horace and B.J. wanted to be Pax and Perdue wanted to be Cartwright and Scott Williams wanted to be Perdue. On the second three-peat, everyone knew their place from 1 to 12.

It started with Jordan. Who was Jordan’s partner in the first three-peat? In a way it was Pippen, his most talented teammate. But Cartwright was his co-captain. And Paxson was his longest running teammate and the man with whom Jordan felt the strongest on-the-floor kinship.

In the second three-peat, all of those partnership roles — talent, captainship, tenure — were filled by Pippen.

The players’ origins were also significant. In 1991, Pippen, Grant, King, Armstrong, and Perdue were recent first-round picks, and expected the treatment that status bestowed. Free agents

Levingston and Hopson arrived for the 1991 season thinking they'd be featured players; Levingston played the fourth fewest minutes in the playoffs, Hopson the fewest. Rookie free agent Scott Williams wanted more run too.

The opposite was the case on the second three-peat. That team was crewed by veterans, nearly each of whom already tasted failure and was seeking one last shot at glory. One by one, Krause's moves built the bricks of the second team, as The Sleuth scratched his "find a gem" itch.

And this is why, despite their mutual antipathy and public discord, Krause and Jackson were a critical and natural duo. Krause was a scout's scout. Jackson was a coach's coach.

A scout wants to find new players.

A coach wants to guide them.

To borrow a metaphor from Bill Parcells, Krause bought the groceries, Jackson cooked the meal.

It started with Kukoc. In July 1993, the team ended a four-year odyssey to wrangle the brilliant European to Chicago, signing him to an eight-year, \$17.6 million contract.

"I will work every day preparing for a championship," [Kukoc told reporters](#).

Next came Kerr and Wennington. The Bulls were Kerr's fourth NBA team, Wennington's third, with the latter returning to the NBA after two years in Italy. [Of the four players the Bulls signed on Sept. 29](#), the Tribune wrote that Kerr had "the best chance to stick." He and Wennington each signed for the free agent minimum of \$150,000.

In February 1994, Krause sent King to Minnesota for Luc Longley. For Krause, this was an admission of error — Krause picked King sixth in 1989, ahead of [Jackson's choice Shawn Kemp](#) — and a chance for vindication.

"It wasn't a slap at Will (Perdue) when we got Luc," Krause told Isaacson. "Stacey just couldn't flourish here. Fans were so down on him that he was down on the whole thing. And you can never have too many big people."

Longley was the seventh pick in 1991 and an on-again-off-again starter for Minnesota. But at 7-2 he was three inches taller than King, two years younger, and earned nearly the same salary, giving the Bulls a big, young player whom they hoped to develop.

"Tex feels this young man will fit in," Krause told the Tribune, referencing assistant coach Tex Winter. "All the coaches wanted this young man very badly."

That 1994 team was the beginning of The New Bulls. Somehow they managed to lose the game's best player and win only two fewer games than they'd won with him the year before. Part of that was the younger talent — along with the King/Longley swap, the team replaced 33-year-old Trent Tucker, 31-year-old Rodney McCray, and 31-year-old Darrell Walker with the 25-year-old Kukoc, 28-year-old Kerr, and 30-year-old Wennington. Cartwright (36) and Paxson (33) saw their minutes drastically reduce, and saw those minutes taken by Longley (25) and Pete Myers (30).

The pseudo improvement (winning 57 games with MJ and 55 without him) was certainly affected by Phil's influence and the triangle offense. In 2010, future [fivethirtyeight.com](#) writer Neil Paine crafted a nifty breakdown at Basketball Reference on [how the '94 Bulls succeeded as they did without Mike](#), concluding that the defense improved, the offense remained efficient, Pippen performed better than expected, and Jackson steered the ship.

And yet...

"I remember one night watching the game, and they were up six or seven," Francona said in the Jordan documentary. "And Michael said, the way the game was going, 'They're not going to win.' I was just sitting there, kind of half paying attention. And he goes, 'What they need isn't there.' And I didn't quite follow him, but he was talking about himself."

## **The ship starts sinking**

Led by six of the '93 team's top seven talents, the 1994 Bulls rode the wave of the '93 championship. But the 1995 Bulls were a team nearing collapse.

In a contentious, elongated departure, Grant left in the summer of '94. The team gave their Grant money to Ron Harper with expectations of him filling Jordan's scoring vacuum; Harp ended up out of the starting lineup and averaging under seven minutes per game in the 1995 playoffs. The team's other big signing was forward Larry Krystkowiak, who ended up on the outs due to injury and uninspired play.

The upside was that by '95, the Bulls had six stalwarts of the second three-peat: Kukoc, Kerr, Wennington, Longley, Harper, and Jud Buechler. The team's character was shifting from guys seeking minutes to guys seeking redemption.

For most of this group — including, later, Randy Brown and arguably Rodman — their careers topped out with the Bulls, not just in terms of team success but in personal bests too. It's no coincidence: Jackson knew how to use them, Jordan knew how to drive them, Pippen knew how to make them feel safe. They had no aspirations for anything beyond playing their hardest and contributing to wins. They weren't stars and did not want to be.

The moment that epitomizes that spirit came immediately after championship number six, when Brown found Jordan on the court and hugged him.

“Thanks man,” [Brown told Jordan](#), each man holding the other’s head. “Thanks Mike. I hope everything goes well for you.”

## **The new Michael learns to co-exist**

I know I mentioned this earlier but it must be repeated: from his return to hoops until the end of the ‘98 season, Michael Jordan, aged 32 to 35, played in 357 of 358 possible preseason, regular season, All-Star, and postseason games, missing only one preseason game in 1998. He won all three scoring titles, 2 of 3 regular season MVPs, 2 of 3 All-Star MVPs, 3 of 3 Finals MVPs. This was Terminator durability and T-1000 precision.

MJ’s role in driving that second three-peat to wins it had no business winning (including, in a way, the ‘98 title) cannot be understated. He was the trainer and the jockey and the thoroughbred in one.

“Sometimes you have to be an asshole,” Jordan told Jackie MacMullan in [her astounding profile of Kobe Bryant](#) upon Bryant’s retirement. “Sometimes your teammates are going to hate you, but all the guys I went after — Luc Longley, Steve Kerr, Jud Buechler — they won multiple championships, so I’m pretty sure they understand.”

Jordan wasn’t nearly as prickly though in his second go-round. After his famous “double nickel” against the Knicks in March 1995, MJ told Jackson in private, “You’ve got to tell the players they can’t expect me to do what I did in New York every night. In our next game, I want them to get up and get going — to play as a team.”

“This was the new Michael,” Jackson wrote in his memoir. “In the past he would have reveled in his triumph over the Knicks — and most likely attempted a repeat performance the following day. But he’d returned from his baseball sabbatical with a different perspective on the game. He wasn’t interested in going solo anymore; he longed for the team harmony that had made the Bulls champions.”

Jordan’s post-baseball self empowered the bench, even when it seemed otherwise. Talking to Lazenby, Jackson recalled a conversation with Tex Winter in 1995 in which the two men wondered if Jordan would still work to fit into the triangle offense. Winter asked Jackson to run it past Jordan. Jordan was unequivocal.

“The triple-post offense is the backbone of this team,” he told Jackson. “It’s our system, something that everybody can hang their hat on, so that they know where to go and how to operate.”

This was a massive change in perspective from Jordan, who once dubbed the triangle the “equal opportunity offense.” What Jackson saw was a man accepting his limitations. Jordan still won scoring titles, but averaged under 30 points per game and shot under .500. He still schooled defenders but with a fadeaway instead of flight. He still had his killer instinct, yet he was newly vulnerable, professionally and personally, and spent his summer [scrimmaging with fellow NBA stars](#), including Rodman, during the “Space Jam” shoot. When he returned for training camp, he was uniquely focused.

“He was out to prove a point and get his game back in order,” Kerr told Lazenby. “So every practice was like a war.”

Kerr got it the worst — his famous training camp fist fight with Jordan started when Jackson left practice to take a media conference call, leaving MJ as the unchecked alpha male. The practice grew physical between Jordan and Kerr, MJ threw a punch, a fight ensued, and Jordan stormed out.

“It made me look at myself and say, ‘You know what? You’re really being an idiot about this whole process,’” Jordan recalled in “Eleven Rings.” “I knew I had to be more respectful of my teammates.”

Respect on the second three-peat came from all corners. One could argue Grant was a more valuable player from ’91 to ’93 than Rodman was from ’96 to ’98. Grant played more minutes per game, more games total, and never lost his starting spot in the postseason.

Yet I take Rodman due to, of all things, his personality.

“Dennis was like subservient to Michael in an emotional way, not a physical way,” Kerr told Lazenby. “He never did anything for Michael that he didn’t do for the rest of us, but there was just this understanding that Michael is the ‘greatest’ and I’m below him, and so I’m not going to mess with him, and vice versa. It was really interesting.”

Rodman, in other words, embraced the team’s hierarchy. During the first three-peat, Grant wanted equal treatment with Jordan and Pippen. Grant’s feelings were totally understandable, and it’s not like he was alone on the team in his aspirations. He wanted offensive opportunities and respect. Rodman sought neither.

“I’ve been around great players before,” [Rodman said in 1996](#). “And these two guys are pretty much in a class by themselves.”

## Final grades

So which group was better? Based on minutes played — that is, how many players were trusted to play big minutes — the first three-peat appears to be deeper, with more players logging at

least 20% of possible playing time, while the second three-peat was more top heavy. Of the nine players over the six titles who played in at least two postseasons without being a regular starter, Kerr averaged by far the most minutes, but Wennington, Buechler, and Brown were way at the bottom:

	GAMES	MIN/GAME
Kerr	58	19.2
S. Williams	53	14.9
Hodges	34	10.2
Levingston	39	9.8
King	44	9.7
Perdue	48	9.5
Wennington	34	8.5
Buechler	51	6.5
Brown	47	6.0

Yet with the second three-peat, you always felt you knew the exact purpose of each man on the playoff roster, making guys like Buechler and Brown feel more valuable than, say, King and Perdue, despite the latter two playing more minutes. By the start of the 1996 playoffs, the only trump card the first three-peat bench had over the second three-peat bench was the jewelry.

“There was always that lingering thing with Michael, where unless you won a championship with him you weren’t part of the club,” Kerr told Sam Smith. “We needed to win that title first before we all felt like we had his seal of approval.”



## LESSON 4

### Think creatively about your shortcomings

Twenty years later, my number one vision of the Chicago Bulls in the spring of 1996 is 20 limbs and an approximate 35-foot combined wingspan fanned out like a flying octagon — five players between 6-6 and 6-11, four with point guard skills, four who could defend three positions, and a genius on the sideline joining his players in synced consciousness.

In short, they were awesome.

It's no coincidence that the Warriors are too.

While watching Golden State this season, my thoughts have returned time and again to one question and one question only: Why? Why these Warriors? Why after Shaq & Kobe and Duncan's Spurs and the Big 3 Heat and the Big 3 Celtics — why is THIS the team that finally made a successful run at 70 wins, much less 73?

Part is timing, I'm sure. Injuries and talent and trends. I'd imagine Lakers fans around in 1972 felt the same suspicious curiosity watching Jordan, Pippen, Rodman, Kukoc, and Harper creep toward their historic perch. Why didn't the Lakers of Magic & Kareem win 70, or Kareem and Oscar's Bucks, or Bird's Celtics, or the 76ers in 1983?

In some ways, the timing is perfect for Golden State. They are the ideal team for the less physical, analytics-driven, pace-and-space, three-point-happy NBA.

On the other hand, the timing is brutal. They are in a conference with a SECOND team that made a run at 70, a team that won the title two years ago, never mind all the other championship credentials of the San Antonio Spurs.

So the only other answer I can devise to explain Golden State's historic masterwork this season is that it's in the genes. These 2015/2016 Dubs are a direct descendent of the second three-peat Bulls, which made their pursuit of 72-10 perfect. As a Bulls fan, I loved it.

Among other traits, the Warriors have become famous for the fluidity of their bodies. They won the 2015 title when they replaced their 7-foot center in the starting lineup with 6-6 Andre Iguodala, giving them five guys from 6-3 to 6-8, each with a multitude of skills. Different heights than the Bulls, but the same approach.

Steve Kerr said as much [at the beginning of this season](#). Asked to compare the '96 Bulls (for which he played) and this year's Warriors (for which he coaches), he said the biggest similarity was "the versatility defensively."

"That was the first team I was ever part of or that I ever saw that would just switch 1 through 4," Kerr said. "And we could even switch 1 through 5 when we had [Toni] Kukoc out there. So in some ways, that team was like a precursor to the Warriors."

This was Phil Jackson's vision — "a new breed of championship team," as he called it. And it all started with a loss in the playoffs.

## **The Magic win the battle but start a war**

The Bulls' 1995 playoffs loss to the Magic famously crystallized the team's need for a power forward.

But Jackson saw another problem.

The Magic had smothered the Bulls with big guards: 6-7 Hardaway at the point, 6-6 Nick Anderson and 6-8 Dennis Scott roaming the wings, and 6-6 Brian Shaw off the bench.

Jackson already had the option of the 6-7 Pippen at point guard. "What would happen, I wondered, if we had three tall, long-armed guards on the court at the same time?" Jackson wrote in "Eleven Rings."

“Not only would it create confusing mismatches for other teams, but it would also improve defense immeasurably because big guards could switch off and defend post players without resorting to double-teaming.”

To make it happen, Jackson and Krause pulled off a pretty brilliant manipulation of the 1995 expansion draft. Each non-expansion team could protect eight players, and could lose no more than one. The question was whom to protect.

The Bulls' first four choices were obvious: Jordan (their best player), Pippen (their other superstar), Kukoc (their supposed future), and Kerr (the league's best shooter). The team also protected its three centers, Longley, Perdue, and Wennington, because Krause wanted to trade either Longley or Perdue for a power forward and keep Wennington as the backup. And Krause couldn't risk leaving Wennington unprotected because the expansion teams were in Toronto and Vancouver and might select the Canadian Wennington for marketing.

Unrestricted free agents could not be protected — for the Bulls, Jud Buechler or Pete Myers.

That left Krystkowiak, the forward whose 1995 was marred by injury, performance, and poor interaction with Jordan; Blount, whom Jordan and Jackson deemed unfit to master the triangle; Harper, whose bad knee, advanced age, and fat contract made him not ideal for an expansion team; rookie power forward Dickey Simpkins, [who'd won Jordan's favor](#); and fan favorite and 1994 All-Star B.J. Armstrong.

Armstrong was the answer. When word got out that B.J. would be available, Bulls fans were despondent, but that's only because we didn't know the logic. The team was providing the expansion pool's highest scorer and only recent All-Star. By dangling an absurdly talented player by expansion standards, the Bulls were guaranteeing themselves that Armstrong would be their lone expansion draftee.

This left one potential weakness.

“I asked them point blank, ‘Who's going to guard Kevin Johnson?’” [Jackson told Sam Smith in October 1995](#), referencing a conversation with Jordan, Pippen, and Harper about Johnson, the Phoenix Suns point guard who typified the league's small, explosive ball handlers.

“They said given their three abilities and given our counter players like Steve Kerr off the bench, we'll be able to cover smaller guards,” Jackson told Smith.

The plan was set. Like clockwork, the Raptors picked Armstrong number one. That freed Harper to start alongside Jordan, Kerr to be the team's shooting specialist, and the Bulls to use Armstrong's \$2.8 million salary on a power forward.

“We decided to go in a little different direction,” said Krause (who declined an interview request for this story). “We know we have to combat big guards. This is not a slap at B.J. in any way,

shape or form. Obviously, if we had not been prepared to lose B.J., we wouldn't have put him on the list."

## **How the '96 Bulls and '16 Warriors embrace fluidity**

It's called small ball.

The '96 Bulls could have called it "big ball."

But the best term to describe the strategy behind the player combinations most frequently used by either the Warriors or the Jordan/Pippen/Rodman Bulls is "position-free ball." This is what the Bulls were seeking in the summer of 1995 — a fluid lineup with multi-skilled players at every position and nobody hampered by size, either too much of it or too little.

Every piece was in place except power forward. Derrick Coleman didn't happen. Neither did Jayson Williams. The team probably knew it didn't have the pieces to acquire one of the league's premier 4's: Phoenix's Charles Barkley, Seattle's Shawn Kemp, or Charlotte's Larry Johnson.

That's when assistant general manager Jim Stack pushed his boss Krause to reconsider San Antonio's Rodman, a man Krause had long called "not our kind of person."

In the early 1990s, Stack — who could not be reached for comment but whose history with Rodman is brilliantly recounted in [this 2011 Daily Herald story by Mike McGraw](#) — was the Bulls' advance scout, responsible for scouting upcoming playoff opponents. While scouting the Pistons, Stack grew enamored of Rodman.

"What was compelling about Dennis is after he would play 45 minutes in a game, he would go in the weight room for an hour-and-a-half," Stack told McGraw in 2011. "I'd see Dennis in there and he's working himself into a lather riding the exercise bike, lifting weights. That always stuck with me."

After an intense vetting process, the Bulls dealt Perdue for Rodman on the eve of the '95-'96 preseason. Jackson talked Kukoc into embracing the 6th-man role, Longley became the clear-cut starting center, and the Bulls became uniquely malleable — a squad that could shape shift with the situation.

This plan was not lost on the rest of the league. While head coach of the Pacers, Larry Brown spoke with Spike Lee for Lee's 1997 basketball memoir "Best Seat in the House":

"Spike, what I think, and I've looked around the league, is this: when you put Scottie, Michael, Kukoc, and Harper out there, you've always got three big guys on the perimeter who can guard a lot of people and create plays for themselves and their teammates. That is so hard to match up with. That's my problem."

Brown also told USA Today's Roscoe Nance around that time that Indiana struggled with the Bulls' "tremendous perimeter players," adding, "Our game is changing in that direction. I think we've improved ourselves, but only time will tell if we can close the gap on Chicago."

The Bulls reached this point by going big, a four-inch increase from the 6-2 Armstrong to the 6-6 Harper. But they also went small, routinely subbing Longley in favor of Kukoc. They never dropped Longley from the starting lineup the way Golden State did Andrew Bogut last year, but they regularly closed games with either Kerr or Harper opposite Jordan, plus Pippen and Kukoc at forward and Rodman at center.

During the playoffs in the second three-peat, the Bulls had six games in which they could take the lead in the final minute. Either Rodman or Kukoc was the team's tallest player on the floor in five of the six. Think of any famous playoffs game-winner for the Bulls, and the team went small: Kerr, Jordan, Pippen, Kukoc, Rodman for Kerr's Finals winner in '97 and Jordan's Finals winner in '98, or Kerr, Jordan, Buechler, Pippen, Kukoc on MJ's famous fist-pump winner in Game 1 of the '97 Finals.

Certainly a lot of teams put shooters on the floor for game-winning possessions, so that's nothing new. But the Bulls used the Harper-Jordan-Pippen-Kukoc-Rodman starting lineup 17 times in the regular season, finishing 16-1, something the Warriors have never done with their Finals-clinching lineup of Curry-Thompson-Iguodala-Barnes-Green. In fact, starting in 1980, every NBA champion until the late-90s Bulls had a center log top-5 minutes in the playoffs.

During the late 1990s, "small ball" was for teams needing to spin a negative into a positive, like the '97 Suns playing four guards because those were their four best players. But the Bulls had Longley, a center of considerable size and sufficient talent, so when they went small they did so as a radical tactic, not a desperate ploy. The team's structure presaged the league's decline in traditional centers, while Kukoc — whom Krause originally planned to groom as the team's new point guard — was a "stretch 4" before such a term existed.

Simply put, the Bulls were embracing a philosophy of movement and spacing that would not become common in the NBA until 15 or so years later, a game plan perfected by the recent championship incarnations of the Heat, Spurs, and Warriors.

"It was so against the norm," [Jackson said on Chicago Tonight in 2013](#). "It was a team that broke the barriers of a lot of what was the normal thought process," adding that the addition of Rodman and the move of Harper allowed the Bulls "to go to an end game" with "a group of guys who were very unique."

That's why I love watching Steph and co., and why I was not entirely devastated when they broke the record: they share the Bulls' DNA. Not the long threes, obviously, but the unity, purpose, and roster flexibility. They win because they have the league's best player who is also its greatest scorer, one of the league's best non-Steph scorers, two of its most versatile

defenders, a fabulous coach, a respected hierarchy, and a top-to-bottom embrace of a unified mission.

Remind you of someone?

“By midseason,” Jackson wrote in “Eleven Rings,” “it became clear to me that it wasn’t competition per se that was driving the team; it was simply the joy of the game itself. This dance was ours, and the only team that could compete against us was ourselves.”



## LESSON 5

### **Don't panic — that bad break today might be the luck you need tomorrow**

I believe in the planning and principles behind the '96 Bulls and the whole second three-peat. A lot of sound reasoning went into those teams. But that doesn't mean there wasn't any luck.

As I researched this team, I had fun diving into history's wrinkles — those mostly forgotten sharp left turns our memories ironed into straightaways. The lesson: like the parable of the Chinese farmer, you truly never know if an event will end up being good luck or bad, so plan the best you can, react pragmatically, and move on.

And with that, here are my two favorite “what if?” moments of the 1996 Bulls — they're related.

#### **What if Chris Dudley didn't sign with the Trail Blazers in 1993?**

I know what you're thinking: What the hell does Chris Dudley joining Portland in 1993 have to do with the '96 Bulls? If I hadn't come across this arcane bit of history I would be asking the exact same question.

So let's move back one year to the summer of '93 just to demonstrate the full unpredictability of life. Hang onto your hats: this is about to get convoluted.

Despite a forgettable 1993 with the Nets (71 games, 16 starts, 3.5 PPG, 7.1 RPG), Chris Dudley found himself a hot ticket item in the 1993 free agency race. New Jersey offered Dudley a seven-year contract totalling \$20.7 million, with a starting annual salary of \$1.56 million.

But the 43-win, out-in-the-first-round Nets were, like Dudley, going nowhere, and despite not even starting, Dudley wanted to sign with a team he considered a championship contender AND one where he could start.

Along came the Trail Blazers. The Blazers still had Clyde Drexler and were still a 50-win team. The problem was the salary cap: because of the so-called Larry Bird Rule which allows teams to exceed the cap to re-sign their own free agents, the Nets could offer more than Portland. The best the Blazers could offer Dudley was \$11 million over seven years, starting at \$790,000 annually.

Dudley took the \$790,000.

Or, really, he took the \$4 million.

Because what really mattered to Dudley when he signed with Portland was his contract's one-year opt-out clause, which allowed him to become a free agent after one season. At that point, Dudley was a *Portland* free agent, and could cash in on a deal with the Blazers that only New Jersey could have given him in 1993. Which he did in 1994, when as an unrestricted free agent he signed a six-year deal with the Trail Blazers at \$4 million per year.

Dudley's Blazers contract wasn't the only one in 1993 to employ this method, nor the only one scrutinized. The NBA initially challenged the deals between [Kukoc and the Bulls](#) and [Craig Ehlo and the Hawks](#) (from the Cavs) and likely would have challenged the one between [A.C. Green and the Suns](#) (from the Lakers) had it come earlier in the offseason.

But Kukoc was a prized rookie, Ehlo a double-figures scorer, Green a former All-Star. Each earned a contract for the 1993-94 season already at or above \$1 million annually. Ehlo's new contract (and Green's) was a pay raise from 1993, even before the opt-out. Kukoc's was a pay cut, but from outside the NBA.

Dudley on the other hand was taking a 50% pay cut (the first year of his would-be new Nets contract was \$1.56 million) specifically to abandon one NBA team for another that, seemingly, couldn't afford him. The NBA viewed the Dudley contract as a slick dodge. When the league rejected the Kukoc contract, it did so by simply stating the deal was "not a valid provision," offering no comment about any attempt by the Bulls to circumvent the salary cap.

When Dudley signed with Portland, [the league called his contract](#) "a blatant and transparent attempt" to circumvent the cap and bashed the deal repeatedly in the press. The NBA's

challenge of the Kukoc and Ehlo contracts failed at the Special Master level; the Dudley contract [made it to the federal courts](#).

And though U.S. District Judge Dickinson Debevoise seemed to empathize in his decision with the NBA — the league argued that Dudley and the Blazers had a “secret agreement” for Dudley to trigger the one-year opt-out, an assessment Debevoise said “all the world could see” — he found that the deal as constituted did not actually violate the salary cap.

(For an extremely detailed breakdown of the Dudley deal and its effect on the NBA, [read this from the Marquette Law Review](#).)

Dudley was free to join the Blazers. You know who else Portland was considering at center in 1993? A successful Italian team’s rejuvenated star: Bill Wennington. He landed with the Bulls, the only other team interested in his services.

## **What if Horace Grant wasn’t sooooo infuriated with the Bulls?**

In June 1994 the league’s collective bargaining agreement expired. A new one would have to be negotiated by summer’s end, and the league wanted to remove the one-year opt-out clauses.

Around this time, the Bulls were in contract talks with Horace Grant. Everything about Grant’s 1994 free agency was a cot damn disaster. The All-Star forward was sick of Chicago. Providing an escape route were the Orlando Magic, who were so open with their pursuit of Grant in the spring of 1994 that [the Bulls filed tampering charges](#). In July, [Orlando worked furiously](#) to free roster space and money for Grant, [leading to negotiations](#).

In a contested sequence of events, something happened between Reinsdorf and Grant that drove a stake into their relationship. According to Reinsdorf, Grant agreed via handshake to a new contract — 5 years, \$20 million, plus incentives — and later, [Reinsdorf claimed, reneged](#). According to Grant, the meeting was not a negotiation but a philosophical discussion about “the morality of sports.”

“He knows within his heart, and God knows, that the only time we shook hands was for me to say goodbye and walk out of his office,” [Grant said after](#).

Both sides infuriated, Grant signed with Orlando [for \\$22.3 million over 6 years](#), which at \$3.7 million annually was purportedly under Grant’s market value based on Reinsdorf’s alleged offer of \$4 million a year. The Magic could not give Grant more than that because they did not have enough cap space.

But Grant and the Magic had a plan: the one-year opt-out. The NBA smelled a rat and challenged the deal. This time, Judge Debevoise ruled against the one-year opt-outs. Faced

with either returning to the Bulls or going to Orlando for even less money than originally thought, Grant took less money.

“I said, ‘Horace, if you want to go back to Chicago, just tell me,’ ” Grant’s agent Jimmy Sexton [told the Orlando Sentinel](#) in September. “He told me, ‘No, I’ll never go back to Chicago.’ I think they underestimated his resolve to play here.”

Instead of returning to the Bulls, Grant signed with the Magic for \$17 million over five years, or \$3.4 million per year. (Of course the deal came with an escape clause after two years, after which [Orlando re-signed Grant for \\$10 million per year](#).) Krause considered Grant the first Bulls free agent the team wanted to re-sign and couldn’t.

Once the Bulls realized Grant was gone, the team made its move on Clippers guard Ron Harper, [a high-priced free agent coming off a 20-point season](#). The Knicks were going hard after Harper too, [but could only offer \\$1.25 million](#). Harper earned \$4 million in 1994 with the Clippers, so as much as he wanted out of L.A. he was unlikely to accept less than half his current salary.

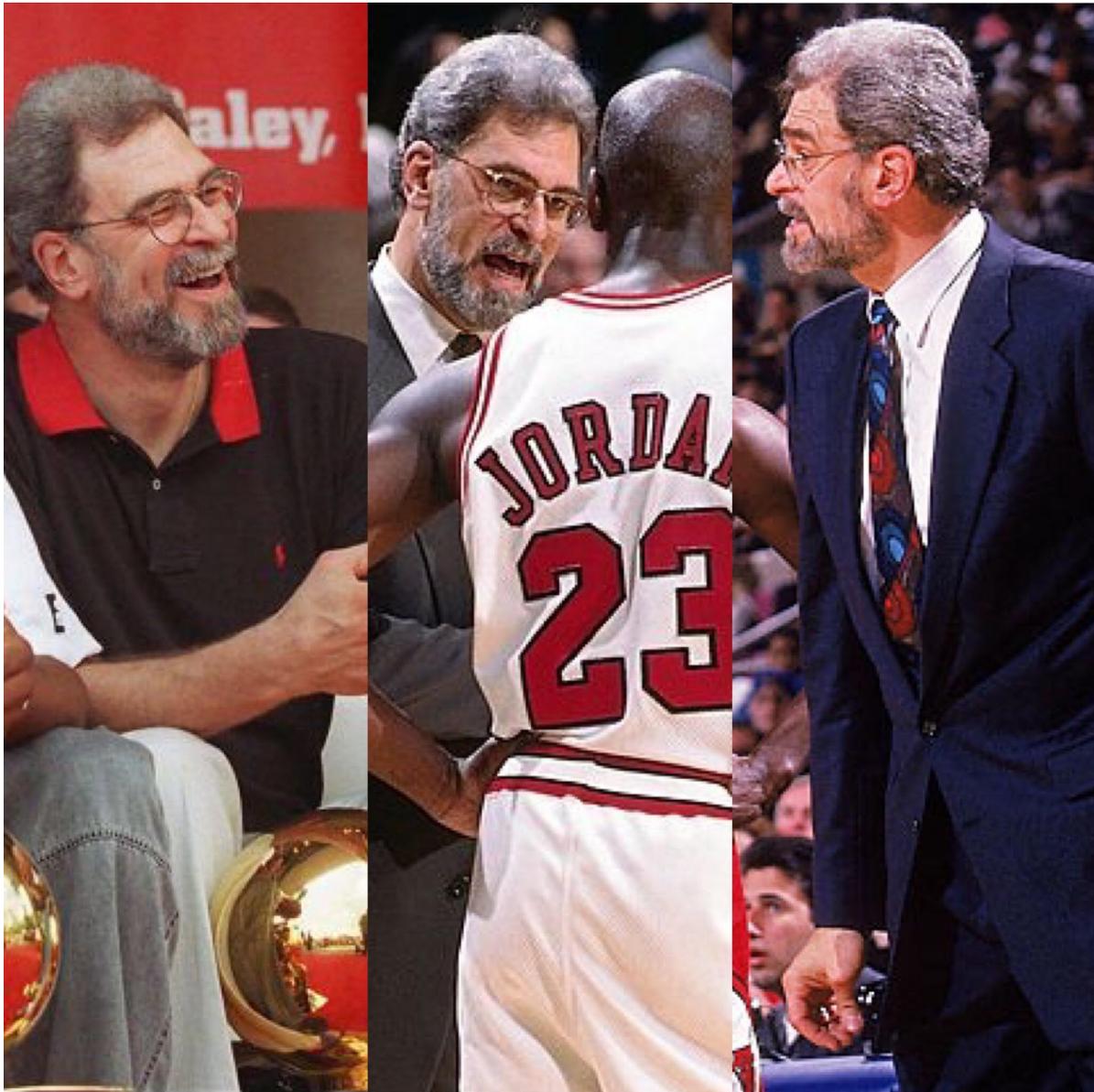
That is, unless the deal came with a one-year opt-out. But Harper was one year too late for that, [as Grant found out](#), and both men [had Chris Dudley to thank](#). Not wishing to take less money with the Knicks or stay with the Clippers, [Harper signed with the Bulls](#), the team [he’d wanted from the beginning](#).

So now because of the chuzpah of the Blazers-Dudley ‘93 deal, the Bulls had Wennington and Harper and were on the road to having an opening for Rodman, who was better suited for this particular Bulls team than Grant.

Rodman, meanwhile, was a stroke of another kind of luck, having fallen so out of balance with the Spurs that they were willing to trade the four-time defending rebounding champ and a future Hall of Famer for a career backup.

And there you have it: three of the ‘96 team’s top eight postseason performers arriving from a seed that starts with Chris Dudley and centers on one of the worst free agent debacles in Bulls history.

AKA, luck.



## LESSON 6

### Find a coach who helps you be your best self

In the summer of 1996, after winning his fourth championship, Michael Jordan came within 30 minutes of signing with the New York Knicks.

“New York was right downstairs,” Jordan told Spike Lee in “Best Seat In the House.” “The Bulls — all they had to do was mess up.”

The Knicks had an offer on the table for Jordan: one year, \$25 million. “We told (Jordan’s team) they could have all our cap room,” Madison Square Garden President Dave Checketts said at the time.

Jordan’s agent gave Jerry Reinsdorf an ultimatum: pony up or, ya know, start spreading the news. Reinsdorf submitted, giving Jordan a one-year contract for \$30 million. This was the summer Shaq split for L.A., [along with a million other high-profile moves](#), but nothing would have topped the reigning triple threat MVP — All-Star, regular season, Finals — leaving his lifelong team for his lifelong rivals which also happened to be the country’s biggest TV market. You damn well better believe a Knicks lineup of John Starks, MJ, Anthony Mason, Charles Oakley, and Patrick Ewing would have been favorites to win the title in 1997.

Except one thing.

“My coach is everything,” Jordan told Spike. “Don’t know what kind of coach (Jeff) Van Gundy is. I know Phil.”

When Spike asked Jordan if joining the Knicks would have meant a championship, the ever-confident Greatest Of All Time had one answer: “I don’t know.”

That is the respect Jordan has for the player-coach relationship.

And that is the power of Phil Jackson.

## **The Chicago Bulls and the five stages of tribal development**

In “Eleven Rings,” Jackson shares the five stages of tribal development from the 2008 book “Tribal Leadership.” Stage 1, which Jackson says is “shared by most street gangs,” is “Life Sucks.” Stage 2 is “My Life Sucks,” a step up from Stage 1 by suggesting its occupant can see hope outside his or her own life. “Think *The Office* on TV or the *Dilbert* comic strip,” Jackson explains.

Stage 3 focuses on individual achievement: “I’m Great (And You’re Not).” This is the stage the 1991 Bulls needed to escape to be champions. Once they did, they were in Stage 4: “We’re Great (And They’re Not).” This stage is “dedicated to tribal pride,” Jackson writes, adding that “this kind of team requires a strong adversary, and the bigger the foe, the more powerful the tribe.” It’s no wonder that Jackson views the first three-peat as a Stage 4 team, driven as they were by bitter feuds with the Pistons and Knicks.

The second three-peat, though, reached Stage 5, “a rare stage characterized by a sense of innocent wonder,” Jackson writes, combined with the belief that “Life is Great.”

Jackson’s impact on the team’s six rings is no side story. The argument that, “Well, any coach could win with Michael, Scottie, Shaq, and Kobe” is nonsense. Both Jordan and Shaq were the

league's most talented player before Jackson got hold of them, yet Jackson's contribution was to provide the structure that elevated every player to his best possible self — the stars included.

"It really became Phil's team after Michael retired (in 1993) because it had to be," Kerr told Lazenby. "He was the dominant presence. ... Scottie was never a guy who was going to seize control of a team from a leadership standpoint. He was everybody's favorite teammate, but one of the reasons for that was he was vulnerable. And Phil was not vulnerable."

The fingerprints of Phil's leadership are all over the 90s Bulls. Along with giving Jordan a system that would enable him to win a title, Jackson also earned Jordan's trust by never asking him for favors — no autographs or photos.

When the team entered the 4th quarter of Game 6 of the '92 Finals down 15 at home, Jackson called up the unexpected quintet of Pippen, Armstrong, Bobby Hansen, Stacey King, and Scott Williams to lead the team into striking distance before the other starters returned.

During Pippen's 1.8 seconds of infamy, Jackson's reaction was pragmatic: he conferred with Pippen that he was not going into the game, and then found a new man to inbound the ball. He considered speaking with Pip afterward, but when Cartwright berated Pippen in the locker room, the matter, to Jackson, was settled.

"After (Cartwright) expressed himself, there was absolutely nothing left to say," Jackson said. "We simply said the Lord's Prayer and that was it."

Jackson's player-centric methodology was tested most memorably when the Bulls acquired Rodman, prompting a grinning Jordan to say in 1995 that Jackson "is going to call on a lot of that Zen practice that he uses."

Krause was the first Bulls decision maker to feel confident about Rodman. Jackson needed to be next. The two men met Rodman September 30, 1995, a Saturday, and again the following day, October 1. Could Rodman master the triangle offense, Jackson wanted to know?

"That's no problem for me," Rodman said. "The triangle's about finding Michael Jordan and getting him the ball."

Jackson stressed that they were one piece away from a ring. "We can't screw it up," he said. "We're in the position to win a championship and we really want to get back there."

The three met the next day to review team rules. Rodman again assured them he would not be a problem and guaranteed a title.

Jackson conferred with Jordan and Pippen later that day. [As Rodman tells it](#), they all met at Krause's house, with Jackson instructing Rodman to apologize to Pippen for his hard fouls during the Bad Boys days. Pippen accepted the apology; he and Jordan signed off on the trade.

Jackson, Rodman said, asked him how he would feel joining the Bulls.

“I don’t give a damn if I’m here or not,” Rodman said.

“Congratulations,” Rodman recalls Jackson saying. “You’re a Chicago Bull.”

## **Phil’s 7-year theory**

The question of “Why Rodman?” is fairly straight forward: he was the best player the team could acquire.

The better question is “Why Perdue?” as in: Why trade Will Perdue, the man who started all 78 regular season games in which he played in 1995, instead of Luc Longley, who was still learning the system and was a regular recipient of Jordan’s wrath? Perdue even cost less than Longley and would cost even less in 1996 since Longley’s contract was expiring and could earn a pay bump as a big body in demand.

Part of the reason is that the Spurs specifically asked for Perdue. “(Perdue) brings a consistent work ethic — and I put the emphasis on ‘consistent,’” [said then-Spurs GM Gregg Popovich](#). “He doesn’t care about anything but the team in the truest sense of the word.”

Part of the reason is Perdue’s role on the team. Per “Second Coming,” Jackson viewed the team’s three centers like this: Longley had a “physical presence” and was someone who could block the lane “even though he was maligned for his play”; Perdue was “the good offensive rebounder” who “knew our system of offense as well as anybody and could play the backside of our offense”; and Wennington had a great jump shot.

Of those three, the largest overlap in skill set with Rodman is Perdue: rebounding, intelligence, ability to play the backside of the offense.

But the other huge reason for trading Perdue stemmed from Jackson’s father Charles, a Pentecostal minister. The Jacksons traveled throughout Phil’s childhood, going from one town to another to preach to new parishioners.

“You can only stay in one place five years and then your message starts falling on deaf ears,” Jackson recalls his father telling him.

A minister may have only gotten five years, but a coach, Jackson felt, got seven. And that’s how the 1996 Bulls were built. Jackson liked the 1994 team because of the infusion of new minds to mold. His contract was expiring after the 1996 season, his seventh as head coach, and in 1995 he told Krause that he would only return if the team cut loose of every player from the championship years, including Pippen.

Jackson wasn't even sure if he would return at all, telling Isaacson, "I'd like to fulfill my contract and then I'd like to re-evaluate." Reinsdorf had suggested to Jackson that a one-year sabbatical should be part of a coach's job description, and Jackson liked the sound of that, even doing it for the 1999 season between his stints in Chicago and Los Angeles.

So what would have happened if Michael didn't retire in 1993? Well, the Bulls almost certainly would have won championship #4. But the forces pulling this team apart would have been stronger than after 1993. Any of the following would have been in play:

- Horace grows even more fed up with his place in the franchise following the four-peat, and becomes an even hotter free agent. He leaves.
- Pippen and Jordan don't learn the lessons they did apart.
- MJ has even less to prove after four straight rings, and he retires after 1994.
- Seattle doesn't squash the Pippen-Kemp trade because the fans aren't worried about Pip's attitude because the 1.8 seconds never happens.
- Phil decides to take his one-year sabbatical, but he doesn't have Pippen to return to, so a retired MJ doesn't have Phil to return to.
- Or maybe Jordan doesn't retire but the Bulls trade Pippen and Phil wants to take a year off, and Jordan blesses the team trading him for a crazy bounty, and the Bulls enter the '94-'95 season with Kukoc, Kemp, Ricky Pierce, the Jordan Bounty, and whoever they get with Grant's money, but without Phil Jackson.

I mean really, who knows?

Instead, Jordan retired, Pippen and Jackson stayed, Grant left, the roster turned over, and when Jordan returned the first three-peat holdovers were down to Pippen, Armstrong, and Perdue. The Bulls let Armstrong go in the expansion draft, shipped Perdue for Rodman in October, and just like that, Jackson's needs were met and the players from the first three-peat — aside from the two most important — were gone.

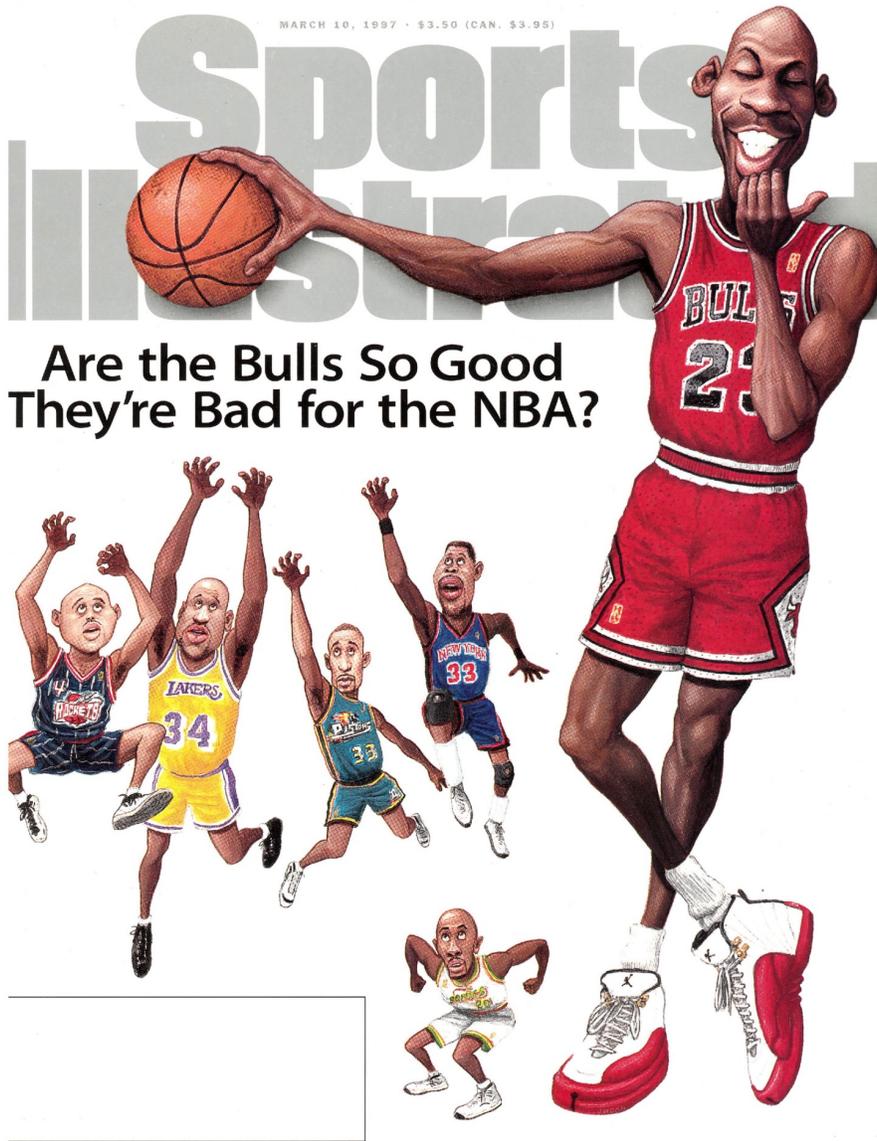
In their place was a new group whose collective experiences led to the greatest three-year run the NBA has ever seen.

"I think we've got a collection of weapons that somehow Phil's going to blend to where we give ourselves the best shot," [Jordan said in an interview early in the 1996 season](#). "It could be dangerous if we get everybody on the same page and do the right things that we know we're capable of doing."

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# Sports Illustrated

**Are the Bulls So Good  
They're Bad for the NBA?**



**Epilogue, March of 1997:**

**“Are the Bulls so good, they’re bad for the NBA?”**

The nation’s “Michael Jordan is BACK!” honeymoon lasted, oh, probably until December of 1996, six months after the Bulls hoisted the trophy. The team simply dominated American pop culture in all facets like no team ever had and, in the meantime, made people sick.

Back on top of the basketball world, Jordan was breaking into show business and the fragrance world. "Space Jam" had debuted as the #1 movie in America, and [MJ's cologne](#) Eau de Jordan, or whatever, was I-Believe-I-Can-Flying off the shelves.

Dennis Rodman's MTV reality show "The Rodman World Tour" debuted in December of 1996, and his first starring film role, "Double Team" with Jean-Claude Van Damme, arrived four months later.

Between NBC, SportsCenter, NBA Inside Stuff, and *Sports Illustrated*, the Bulls could not be missed. They didn't just win 72 games and a championship in '96. They bagged all three MVP awards (Jordan), two of the five All-NBA 1st Team spots (Jordan and Pippen), three of the five All-Defense 1st Team spots (Jordan, Pippen, Rodman), Sixth Man of the Year (Kukoc), Coach of the Year (Jackson), Executive of the Year (Krause), plus the scoring title (Jordan) and the rebounding title (Rodman).

By December 5, 1996, the Bulls were 17-1, a game better than the year before, and killing teams so badly that three months later, *Sports Illustrated* was left scrounging for new Bulls angles.

They found one in March of 1997. The cover image was an illustration of a bored, yawning Jordan holding the ball high in the air above miniature, desperate, leaping versions of Patrick Ewing, Charles Barkley, Gary Payton, Shaquille O'Neal, and Grant Hill. (Take that, Mailman!)

[The headline](#): "Are the Bulls So Good They're Bad For the NBA?"

As a 15-year-old Bulls fanatic, my reaction was reflexive, obvious, and to me, righteous: "Are you out of your freakin' mind??"

It was easy for me to feel like anyone who did not enjoy the Bulls was crazy. I mean, try telling that to fans of the Knicks, Jazz, Sonics, and Pacers. Yet 20 years later, I endured one of the worst seasons of Chicago Bulls basketball while simultaneously loving every minute of one of the great teams I've ever watched in sports: these 2016 Golden State Warriors.

Sports are tribal. They are territorial. We say "we" even though we are not on the team. We cling to regional identity even though "our" players may have never before set foot in our city. Like Jerry Seinfeld famously said, "We're cheering for laundry."

I'm not here to make the argument that "It's more than laundry." After 13,000 words, I'm guessing you know how I feel about supporting "my" team.

I want to talk about supporting "their" team.

All this season, people asked me how I would feel if the Warriors broke the Bulls' record of 72 wins. I certainly wasn't rooting for them to do it, but I also wasn't rooting for them to fall short. My interest was simple: They were beautiful, and I got to watch them.

There are a lot of reasons the act of being a sports fan is different than being a fan of any other popular entertainment, but one of them is that no one blinks if you watch your favorite movie repeatedly for 20 years. Or if you are still listening to your favorite album, now two decades old.

But there are a lot of folks who just don't understand the passion of sports fans who want to re-watch 20-, 30-, or 40-year-old games.

Me? I've never understood why you wouldn't want to re-watch them.

We build our lives around these games. People schedule weddings around these games. We leave work early. We stay up late. We let our children stay up late. When I was a boy my parents had a strict "No TV after dinner on a school night" rule that could only be broken when the Bulls were playing and our homework was finished, and I don't even remember negotiating for that allowance. It was assumed.

And why not? Every season has a "best team," but some seasons have historic teams, and the Bulls' historic greatness was so obvious even in the moment that missing a game felt like falling behind humanity. Like everyone you know had advanced to a new consciousness and you still thought the Earth was flat.

It just makes no sense to me to pretend that all Bulls teams are created equally, and hence we must watch each once and never again. I've checked out on teams before, and conversely I will watch games and highlights of great teams until my teeth fall out. If they're from Chicago, the bond lasts forever. If they're not — well, my heart's not in it, but my joy still is.

I believe in "we." But I also believe you're a damn fool if you can't get excited for a brilliant "they." When sports fans lose sight of achievement, entertainment, and transcendence in the name of "legacy" and ranking and records and rivals, we lose the essence of the gift of sports.

My Bulls will be back. I stay with them through the valleys to enjoy the peaks.

In the meantime, I will enjoy pretty much whoever is good. If you can't be with the one you love, then love the one that makes 13.1 three-pointers per game.

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### LESSON 1

**Page 10:** [Jordan's quote about telling teammates in 1993 that he was going to retire, and then thinking he was drunk] "Transition Game." Page 3

**Page 10:** ["I never would do that and Jerry Reinsdorf never suggested it," Jordan told her about the Bulls chairman.] "Transition Game." Page 10

**Page 10:** ["No, this is it," Jordan recalled telling his coach. "I want to do it now because I don't want it to linger on in my mind ... and I don't want you to have hope (of a comeback) in the back of your mind when actually there's no hope."] "Transition Game." Page 10

**Page 12:** [Seattle pulled out when owner Barry Ackerly panicked, in part because Sonics fans complained in droves on local radio.] "Second Coming." Page 54

**Page 12:** ["A lot of teams were willing to put me on their 25-man roster," Jordan told Isaacson. "But I knew it wasn't genuine. I knew it was only a business decision and not a baseball decision."] "Transition Game." Pages 11-12

**Page 13:** [Jordan's quote about wanting to teach Penny Hardaway and Chris Webber a lesson] "Second Coming." Page 33

**Page 14:** [In "Michael Jordan, The Life," author Roland Lazenby reported Reinsdorf trying to talk Jordan out of leaving the White Sox organization, telling Jordan he was "quitting baseball for the wrong reasons."] "Michael Jordan, The Life." Page 511

## **LESSON 2**

**Pages 15-16:** [Pippen to Clippers section.] "Second Coming." Pages 81-84

**Pages 16-17:** [Wennington's film study story with Scottie Pippen.] "Bill Wennington's Tales From the Bulls Hardwood." Pages 12-13

**Page 17:** ["Poor Scottie," the baseball-playing Jordan told reporters in Birmingham afterward. "I kept telling him it's not easy being me. Now he knows."] "Michael Jordan, The Life." Page 503

**Page 17:** [Jordan on the Pippen/Kukoc dynamic and how Kukoc reacted to MJ's retirement.] "Transition Game." Pages 13-14

**Page 18:** ["Playing with Toni, I would have been more sympathetic, with all the things he had to adjust to, than Scottie was," Jordan told Isaacson. "Scottie was a little bit impatient. As much as he was trying to help him, the public perception of him during games was the yelling. No one wants to be yelled at on the court."] "Transition Game." Page 22

**Page 18:** [Jordan's quote about seeing Kukoc's confidence to attempt game-winning shots] "Transition Game." Page 23

**Page 18:** ["I told them, 'You don't have to tell me. Kukoc is going to take the shot and they're going to win,'" Jordan said. "I predicted the whole scenario."] "Transition Game." Page 23

**Page 18:** [Jordan's reaction to Pippen's 1.8 seconds.] "Transition Game." Page 24

**Page 18:** [Jackson's explanation for the team's failure to win a championship in 1994 wasn't Pippen's leadership, but that "we didn't have a Scottie Pippen behind a Michael Jordan," adding that "Scottie had no one like himself to step up behind his effort."] "Transition Game." Page 40

**Page 19:** [In "Second Coming," Smith writes about Jordan in the '95 playoffs driving for an inside bucket instead of passing to open teammates on the wings. Jackson told him to pass next time. "You don't see what I'm looking at," Jordan told him.] "Second Coming." Page 274

**Page 19:** [Wennington remembers Jordan telling his new teammates during training camp of the '96 season to "Jump on the cape and hold on tight because I am going to try to buck you off."] "Bill Wennington's Tales From the Bulls Hardwood." Page 9

**Page 19:** [Wennington's recollection of Jordan's hard passes to Longley.] "Bill Wennington's Tales From the Bulls Hardwood." Page 4

**Page 20:** [Steve Kerr's quote about the difference in reaction between Jordan and Pippen when a Bulls player missed a shot] "There Is No Next." Page 237

**Page 20:** [Bill Wennington's quote about the difference in reaction between Jordan and Pippen when Phil Jackson was grilling a player in film session] "Bill Wennington's Tales From the Bulls Hardwood." Pages 13-14

### **LESSON 3**

**Page 22:** [In Jackson's 2013 memoir "Eleven Rings," Jackson reprinted two sets of portraits he commissioned by Chicago artist Tim Anderson.] "Eleven Rings." Book photo section

**Page 23:** ["It wasn't a slap at Will (Perdue) when we got Luc," Krause told Isaacson. "Stacey just couldn't flourish here. Fans were so down on him that he was down on the whole thing. And you can never have too many big people."] "Transition Game." Pages 112-113

**Page 25:** [Phil Jackson on "The New Michael"] "Eleven Rings." Page 146

**Page 25:** ["The triple-post offense is the backbone of this team," he told Jackson. "It's our system, something that everybody can hang their hat on, so that they know where to go and how to operate."] "Michael Jordan, The Life." Page 523

**Page 26:** ["He was out to prove a point and get his game back in order," Kerr told Lazenby. "So every practice was like a war."] "Michael Jordan, The Life." Page 529

**Page 26:** ["It made me look at myself and say, 'You know what? You're really being an idiot about this whole process,'" Jordan recalled in "Eleven Rings." "I knew I had to be more respectful of my teammates."] "Eleven Rings." Page 155

**Page 26:** ["Dennis was like subservient to Michael in an emotional way, not a physical way," Kerr told Lazenby. "He never did anything for Michael that he didn't do for the rest of us, but there was just this understanding that Michael is the 'greatest' and I'm below him, and so I'm not going to mess with him, and vice versa. It was really interesting."] "Michael Jordan, The Life." Page 534

**Page 27:** ["There was always that lingering thing with Michael, where unless you won a championship with him you weren't part of the club," Kerr told Sam Smith. "We needed to win that title first before we all felt like we had his seal of approval."] "There Is No Next." Page 219

## LESSON 4

**Page 29:** [Jackson speculates on “what would happen ... if we had three tall, long-armed guards on the court at the same time.”] “Eleven Rings.” Page 150

**Page 31:** [Coach Larry Brown on the new Bulls alignment.] “Best Seat in the House.” Page 9

**Page 32:** [Brown also told USA Today’s Roscoe Nance around that time that Indiana struggled with the Bulls’ “tremendous perimeter players,” adding, “Our game is changing in that direction. I think we’ve improved ourselves, but only time will tell if we can close the gap on Chicago.”] “Best Seat in the House.” Page 9

**Page 33:** [“By midseason,” Jackson wrote in “Eleven Rings,” “it became clear to me that it wasn’t competition per se that was driving the team; it was simply the joy of the game itself. This dance was ours, and the only team that could compete against us was ourselves.”] “Eleven Rings.” Pages 149-150

## LESSON 5

**Page 36:** [You know who else Portland was considering at center in 1993? The rejuvenated star of a successful Italian team: Bill Wennington. He landed with the Bulls, the only other team interested in his services.] “Bill Wennington’s Tales From the Bulls Hardwood.” Introduction.

## LESSON 6

**Page 38:** [In the summer of 1996, after winning his fourth championship, Michael Jordan came within 30 minutes of signing with the New York Knicks. “New York was right downstairs,” Jordan told Spike Lee in “Best Seat In the House.” “The Bulls — all they had to do was mess up.”] “Best Seat in the House.” Page 9

**Page 39:** [“My coach is everything,” Jordan told Spike. “Don’t know what kind of coach (Jeff Van Gundy is. I know Phil.” When Spike asked Jordan if joining the Knicks would have meant a championship, the ever-confident Greatest Of All Time had one answer: “I don’t know.”] “Best Seat in the House.” Page 9

**Page 39:** [Jackson describes the five stages of tribal development from the 2008 book “Tribal Leadership.”] “Eleven Rings.” Pages 7-8, 131, 149

**Page 40:** [“It really became Phil’s team after Michael retired (in 1993) because it had to be,” Kerr told Lazenby. “He was the dominant presence. ... Scottie was never a guy who was going to seize control of a team from a leadership standpoint. He was everybody’s favorite teammate, but one of the reasons for that was he was vulnerable. And Phil was not vulnerable.”] “Michael Jordan, The Life.” Page 491

**Page 40:** [“After (Cartwright) expressed himself, there was absolutely nothing left to say,” Jackson said. “We simply said the Lord’s Prayer and that was it.”] “Transition Game.” Page 56

**Page 40:** ["That's no problem for me," Rodman said. "The triangle's about finding Michael Jordan and getting him the ball." Jackson stressed that they were one piece away from a ring. "We can't screw it up," he said. "We're in the position to win a championship and we really want to get back there."] "Eleven Rings." Page 152

**Page 41:** [Phil Jackson's description of the three Bulls centers, Longley, Perdue, Wennington] "Second Coming." Page 227

**Page 42:** [Phil Jackson's quote about wanting to finish his contract and then "re-evaluate"] "Transition Game." Page 37

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack M Silverstein is the author of "[Our President](#)," a non-fiction collection chronicling the rise of Barack Obama to the presidency. His sportswriting has appeared in SB Nation's Windy City Gridiron, RedEye Chicago, Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, ChicagoSide, and Chicago Sun-Times. He is a contributing sports historian on WGN Radio. The best of his 90s Bulls writing can be found in [this tweet string](#). Say hey at [readjack.wordpress.com](http://readjack.wordpress.com) and @[readjack](#). Go Bulls!