Michael Jordan and Baseball

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It was the opening of the American League Championship Series; the first time the Chicago White Sox had been in the playoffs for ten years. Michael Jordan threw out the ceremonial first pitch. It should have been a great night for the White Sox, Chicago's neglected team. Instead, in the seventh inning word spread across America and across the stadium that the man who threw out the first pitch was about to retire from the Chicago Bulls and the NBA.

As the White Sox were getting blasted by the Blue Jays, word spread, a pall came over the stadium, and once again the White Sox were the other story in Chicago.

On Wednesday morning Michael Jordan made it official. The events of the last few months, and indeed the pressures of the last nine years had finally caught up to him. He simply had no desire to start another season.

So ends one of the most amazing stories in recent sport, and the end of the career of one of the greatest basketball players and athletes, of all time.

His statistics are most impressive. In nine seasons Jordan was an all-star nine times. In the last three seasons he led the Bulls to three championships, at times seeming to be able to will victories. He has been Most Valuable Player three times, and has always been the most important player to the Bulls and to the league. He led the league in scoring seven straight years. He was three times named to the all-defensive team, and several times led the league in steals. He was a complete ball player statistically, and more than a complete ballplayer on the court.

Jordan came into the NBA in middle of the new era created by Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, and some extremely skilled and creative marketing people under the leadership of David Stern. With Johnson and Bird the NBA had once again captured the attention of the nation. Michael Jordan took the league to the next level. It was Michael who made the NBA a world-wide sports entertainment business, and it is Michael who is the best known athlete in the world. Children across the world, some of whom have never actually seen a basketball game are caught up in the Michael mystique.
Everywhere he played Jordan filled the arenas. When single game tickets went on sale in Orlando last Sunday it was the Bull's games which sold out first, in less than twelve minutes. There was only one reason for that. If those tickets were put on sale again this weekend, it would not be the Bulls tickets that would sell out first.

He took the League to new levels, but did he take the game to new levels? Clearly Michael Jordan did things with a basketball that had never been done before. His body control and jumping ability defied the rules of physics and physiology. His move to fly down the lane on a free throw and dunk the rebound in one motion was something that had never been seen before. He had to be defensed during a free throw!

But in the end I would argue that he did not transform the game in the same way that Wayne Gretzky did to hockey or Babe Ruth did to baseball. The game had already been transformed by the arrival of the black athlete to basketball. Players such as Elgin Baylor, Walt Frazier, Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, and Julius Erving were the agents of transformation. Michael Jordan elaborated on their styles and took them to new levels. He did not transform the game, but he certainly raised its level.

In addition Michael Jordan redefined professional sports and the character of the professional athlete in America. He became a one-man conglomerate, truly bigger than the game he played. His endorsement money far outstripped his playing contract, and it became very clear in the policies of NBA merchandising and Olympic Dream Team merchandising, that Jordan's associations with Nike superseded those with any other group--the Bulls, the NBA, or the USOC.

Jordan's relationship with Nike changed the way in which marketing groups deal with athletes, and the way in which athletes deal with their teams. When an athlete makes more money from his endorsements than from his playing contract, the general managers of teams are placed at the mercy of the athletes and their agents in the negotiating process.

The Mega-Bucks Super Star is a new reality in sport, those wielding endorsement monies are the new powers in sport, and professional sports will never be the same. This in end might be the most significant facet of the legacy of Michael Jordan.

With Jordan, Bird and Magic now gone an era in NBA history has closed.
On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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