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BASKETBALL

in AMERICA

**From the Playgrounds
to Jordan's Game
and Beyond**

**Bob Batchelor
Editor**



Basketball in America
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Basketball in America *From the Playgrounds to Jordan's Game and Beyond*

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To my family: Linda and Jon Bowen, Bill Coyle, and my wife,
Katherine, whose love makes everything possible.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Bob Batchelor is an award-winning business writer and historian who currently serves as Public Relations Instructor in The School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida. He is the author of *The 1900s* and co-author of *Kleenex, Kotex, and Huggies: Kimberly-Clark and the Consumer Revolution in America* (forthcoming). Batchelor has published more than 350 articles and essays in magazines, Web sites, and reference works, including *The American Prospect Online*, *Dictionary of American History*, *Inside Business*, and *Northern Ohio Live*. He has taught both history and writing at Cleveland State University and Neumann College. As a historical consultant, Batchelor has worked for numerous Fortune 500 companies, including BellSouth, International Paper, Kimberly-Clark, and Accenture.

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Michael Buchert was born in 1979 in Birmingham, Alabama. The product of a family steeped in the tradition of Friday night football, he attended the University of Florida in Gainesville, where he worked as a student manager for the men’s basketball team. He was a member of two SEC Championship seasons at UF, including the miraculous run to the NCAA Final Four in 2000. He currently lives in New York City, where he is working on a master’s degree in Art Therapy.

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Kelly McMasters is a freelance writer in Brooklyn, New York. She has written articles on social history, culture, and the arts for *Glamour*, *NY Arts Magazine*, *Time Out New York*, and *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood* (<www.MrBellersNeighborhood.com>), among others. Her father is a professional golfer and PGA life-member. She is currently getting her MFA in creative nonfiction from Columbia University.

Renada Rutmanis is a recent graduate of University of California at Berkeley. She has written for such magazines as *Premiere* and *Entertainment Weekly*. She plans to begin work on a creative writing MFA in the fall of 2004. She hopes to end up back in California, where she can root (in person) for her favorite basketball team, the Sacramento Kings.

Lawrence E. Ziewacz, PhD, was a professor in the Department of American Thought and Language at Michigan State University, where he received all three of his degrees. In his career, he taught at the community college, state college, and university levels. Ziewacz was a Michigan historian, a historian of American political, cultural, and intellectual history, as well as a sports historian. His 1995 co-authored work, *Payoffs in the Cloakroom: The Greening of the Michigan Legislature, 1938-1946*, received a 1996 *Choice* award as "one of the outstanding academic books of 1995." He co-authored *The Games They Played: Sports in American History, 1865-1980*, co-edited a sports series of books for the Popular Press at Bowling Green State University, and was co-advisory editor for sports for *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*. In addition, he presented and wrote numerous papers and articles on American sports. Ziewacz passed away in December 2003.

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us, I feel their closeness every day. Fritz has already gravitated toward basketball; maybe this book will help guide the way.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Basketball in America

Bob Batchelor

Basketball in America is a collection of essays that explores the intersection of the sport and popular cultures in modern America—as we have defined it—since the 1970s. Our goal is to examine basketball from a cross-cultural and historical perspective to reveal how tightly the game is now wound into American (and by extension, global) popular culture and society.

The impact basketball has had on popular culture becomes more evident day by day, particularly in comparison with earlier decades. There is even a stark contrast between today's game and the game played in the 1970s, the period initially covered in this book. In that decade, for instance, basketball drew record fans, but was undoubtedly the weak sister among major professional sports. The game was as well-known for its violence and widespread drug use as it was for the quality of its players.

Times have changed. Today, Michael Jordan is a household name around the globe. Showing the strength of the game's global ties, a record twenty-one international players were chosen in the 2003 National Basketball Association (NBA) Draft. Professional superstars have cut music CDs, starred in major motion pictures, launched clothing lines, and graced the covers of countless magazines, from *Sports Illustrated* and *SLAM!* to *The National Enquirer* and *People*.

In the amateur ranks, college basketball has taken over the month of March—from the millions of people who participate in office betting pools to the nearly around-the-clock television coverage of the dash toward the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Championship. Across the nation, millions of young people are play-

ing the game in school leagues, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), and church leagues. A park simply isn't complete without the presence of several blacktop courts with rusty rims and weathered nets.

Another stark difference is that today's game is big business. The "corporatization" of basketball begins in the amateur level and progresses up through the college and professional ranks. Nike is the most obvious culprit for critics of this influence. The company funds many amateur leagues, summer camps, and all-star events, while also sponsoring college teams, which many observers believe turns amateurs into walking billboards and quasi-professionals.

Thanks to Jordan's omnipresence, the Nike corporate swoosh may now be the most familiar logo in the world. The signing of young Ohio phenom LeBron "King" James (who dons the familiar number 23 for the Cleveland Cavaliers) ensures that Nike plans to keep it that way. The well-publicized stories about the battles between Adidas and Nike over James keeps the big-business aspect of the sport in the headlines.

Basketball players may be the most watched, commented on, and criticized, both on court and off, of all professional athletes. It is as if people intuitively understand the game's place within the fabric of American society.

For example, the media feeding frenzy surrounding the sexual assault allegations against young Los Angeles Lakers superstar Kobe Bryant became the biggest story in the world during the summer of 2003, even though American soldiers were still dying in Iraq and the national economy slumped.

Unfortunately, some aspects of basketball culture have changed very little from the 1970s to today. Heavy racial overtones cloud the feelings people have about basketball's young, rich, and predominantly black superstars. Professional players have been soundly criticized in recent years for having illegitimate children, womanizing, routinely using recreational drugs, and for a variety of on- and off-court brawls. Some observers have argued that the condemnation of pro basketball players is more intense than in other sports because of race.

Although the implication may rub some people the wrong way, it is easy to imagine that if an NBA All-Star were found dead in a hotel room of an apparent heart attack, like St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Darryl Kile, and authorities also discovered a small bag of marijuana in the room, the basketball player would have faced much more scru-

tiny regarding drug use than Kile did. Also, if basketball faced the same questions about steroids that Major League Baseball does, the easy connection most people make between young blacks and drugs would spark greater public outrage.

AMERICA'S TRUE PASTIME

Despite the kudos heaped on NBA Commissioner David Stern for his work marketing the game around the world, twenty years ago anyone who would have predicted that basketball would possess this kind of influence would have been granted a one-way ticket to the funny farm. There was simply no way to predict the “perfect storm” of Jordan’s arrival, Nike’s role in shaping and dominating global popular culture, and the explosion of a celebrity culture brought on by the information age of cable television and the Internet.

Although the popularity of basketball is undeniable, the game is in a state of constant transformation. Upheaval in the pro arena has focused on the final retirement of the sport’s most popular and talented athlete—Michael Jordan. The post-Jordan NBA is struggling to maintain its growth. Ratings for the 2003 NBA Championship between the San Antonio Spurs and New Jersey Nets plummeted to historically low numbers.

At the same time, however, NBA players are trying their luck in rap, acting in movies, writing books, and trying to become household names in their own right. Thus, it’s an exciting but uneasy time for professional basketball. The rise and popularity of the women’s game over the past decade adds to the excitement. However, growing pains forced the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) to retract and caused the Women’s Basketball Association (WBA) to fold after only three seasons.

Basketball in America, however, does not focus solely on the NBA and the professional game. Unlike other books, this book will include essays that cover the complete range of basketball in the United States, from high school athletics to the NBA. As a result, *Basketball in America* will entertain and inform a large number of readers who treasure basketball and the role it plays in the American consciousness.

For a variety of reasons, from the ease it can be played (little equipment needed, etc.) to the overwhelming number people participating in the sport at all levels, basketball could now claim to be America's new "national pastime." This will be the driving thesis of the anthology and serve as its underlying philosophy. The book, however, will also examine basketball from the perspectives of the high school ranks and the collegiate scene. Investigating these areas allows the authors to dig even deeper into the profound popular culture influences of basketball in the United States.

The beauty of a book examining basketball is that the subject allows for such a broad range of interpretations. The sport cuts across economic, racial, and social boundaries. Its major stars cross over into other forms of popular entertainment more than those in any other professional sport. Basketball has heroes and villains. The game is artistic and graceful while also brutal and harsh. It's still a game, but it pumps billions of dollars into the economy. These contradictions make basketball a wonderful topic through which to examine popular culture and the contemporary history of the United States.

The authors are an eclectic mix of writers, scholars, journalists, former players, coaches, self-described gym rats, and sports enthusiasts. Although they come from diverse backgrounds and have pursued different career paths, one common trait runs through them all—an undying love for the game of basketball. We hope this passion shines through each and every chapter.

BASKETBALL IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Part I of *Basketball in America* examines the game from a cultural perspective, revealing the impact basketball has had outside of the nation's arenas and gymnasiums. Through its stars, basketball has brought street life to the mainstream, popularizing things as divergent as shaved heads and multiple tattoos. Basketball has made sneakers a part of one's fashion sense and given people new points of reference for discussing popular culture.

Although many of baseball's greatest stars have lived and played in the past thirty years, such as Barry Bonds, Nolan Ryan, Greg Maddux, Cal Ripken, and Mark McGuire, no one is going around aping their styles or rapping about them in the latest hip-hop song. As

great as these players are, they don't even particularly exude an image off the field. In contrast, basketball players are woven into the tapestry of popular culture as product endorsers, actors, musicians, and style beacons.

It could be argued, for example, that the nattily dressed Shaquille O'Neal helped bring back the turn-of-the-century-style suit featuring a high lapel and three buttons several years ago by sporting the look in postgame locker room interviews. Soon, the style filtered throughout the entertainment industry and eventually onto department store sales racks.

No sport can match basketball's widespread influence in shaping popular culture. The game's affinity with hip-hop and black culture obviously plays a role. In the past fifteen years, as rap and hip-hop have filtered into the mainstream, basketball has benefited from the association.

Writer and historian Bob Batchelor explores the amazing career of Michael Jordan. Rather than merely tout the numerous individual records Jordan amassed or discuss the team highlights of his six championships won as a Chicago Bull, the author looks at MJ as a popular culture icon. "Why have fans followed, obsessed, and idolized MJ for what has now been decades?" Batchelor asks.

Jordan, like few athletes before him in any sport, transcended basketball and became as popular for his off-court endeavors as for his exploits on the hardwood. Due to Jordan's success as a celebrity, succeeding generations of professional basketball players and athletes in other sports have attempted to replicate his accomplishments.

Writer David Davis examines Marvin Gaye's performance of the national anthem at the 1983 NBA All-Star Game in Los Angeles and puts the accomplishment in its proper historical light. Based on interviews with professional players at the game, broadcasters, Lakers team officials, and Gaye family members and close associates, Davis reveals the behind-the-scenes events leading up to and during the performance in the midst of the Motown star's troubled life—a last hurrah before his murder at the hands of his father a little more than a year later.

Davis skillfully places the reader in the crowd at the game, while deftly analyzing its larger significance. "Twenty years later the rendition has taken on new meaning," Davis explains. "It serves as a bridge between a straitlaced league struggling to find its identity and a global

entertainment powerhouse that embraces hip-hop culture. In a sense, Gaye's anthem foreshadowed the evolution of the NBA, from the era of tight shorts to today's baggy models, from Jerry West's dribbling silhouette on the NBA logo to Michael Jordan's soaring Nike 'Jumpman.'

Kelly McMasters looks at the "strange and serendipitous confluence of events" that led Nike to become the multibillion-dollar global shoe and apparel company that it is today. As a member of Generation X, growing up in the midst of Nike's climb to the top, she places the Nike story within its historical context while also providing insight into the phenomenon from someone who witnessed the early shoe wars.

McMasters, a journalist who has written extensively about social history, culture, and the arts, traces the rise of Nike, examining its founders Phil Knight, a middle-distance runner turned businessman, and his former University of Oregon coach and mentor Bill Bowerman. Then, she deftly shows how Nike played a commanding role in defining popular culture. First, according to McMasters, "Nike was able to hitch itself to the coattails of the fitness boom and use it to their advantage, pumping up the importance of being fit and promising a better life through a better body." Later, as the company teetered financially, Knight and his company took a flyer on the young Michael Jordan. "Nike decided to put all of their proverbial eggs in one basket," McMasters explains. "That basket was Michael Jordan." The rest—as they say—is history.

In "*Hoosiers to Hoop Dreams: Basketball on the Big Screen*," basketball historian and scholar Kevin Grace investigates basketball's place on the silver screen since the appearance of *Hoosiers* in 1986. He shows that "basketball has become a favored theme for sports films, clearly surpassing feature films about football and golf, and rivaling the cultural place of baseball in the national cinematic consciousness."

Sports movies work so well, Grace believes, because they embody the goals and aspirations of the nation in general—change in a land of constant transformation, the promises of both hard work and good works overcoming the odds, flights of individual achievement grounded to team rewards, and, especially, redemption. Sport serves nothing if not to somehow make amends for past or present shortcomings as we strive for victory. Basketball has become the dominant

sport portrayed in movies because of the social aspects that can be explored in basketball, the personal issues that will be raised to the surface, and the dramatic movement of the game with its time-out hesitations building toward the climax.

THE PLAYGROUNDS AND BEYOND

Basketball is a game of space—the distance between you and the person d’ing you up, how far you are from the basket, and the controlled chaos of ten people operating within predetermined borders. The ability to see the game in terms of spacing often defines the boundaries of one’s talent. No one in the history of the NBA could create space like Larry Bird, which allowed the Celtics great to capitalize on his deft shooting touch. On the other end of the spectrum, few players in any sport have been able to reduce space by maximizing the limits of the court to their advantage like Dennis Rodman, who uses every conceivable angle to will rebounds into his outstretched hands, almost always battling against players bigger and stronger.

Regardless of how a person learns the delicate ballet that occurs on the basketball court—whether it is in gym class or at a five-star basketball camp—as players, we hone our skills on the playgrounds. The second part of the book explores the playgrounds and what is produced from minutes, hours, and years spent on burning asphalt and in stifling gyms. This section, in a sense, explores interiors and exteriors—both physical spaces and the philosophical ones in our minds. Journalists do not usually cover this perspective in the sports pages. It is not about box scores; this part of the game starts on the court, when people are learning the game or proving themselves before their peers.

This section provides a rare glimpse behind the scenes—inside the locker room—and examines how basketball helps us identify our own individual value systems. We are given rare access to life inside a big-time Division I men’s college basketball team and what it is like to coach today’s high school player from an educator who is on the frontlines. It all begins on the playground, whether it is honing skills or taking in the lessons of the game that have been handed down from generation to generation. The playgrounds define basketball.

In “The Schoolyard Game: Blacktop Legends and Broken Dreams,” Bijan Bayne dissects the playground game and urban legends who took the game to a different level with moves and play outside the staid box of organized basketball. He shows the evolution caused by playground players and the effect this had on the game, which we take for granted today. “The slam dunk, the no-look pass, and the crossover dribble occupy a global stage,” says Bayne.

Bayne, author of *Sky Kings: Black Pioneers of Professional Basketball*, explains the significance of playground hoops. And for those of you with playground legends of your own, check out Bayne’s “Schoolyard Hall of Fame” and compare picks.

Chris Burtch resurrected a foundering high school basketball program at Slippery Rock Area High School in rural Western Pennsylvania, which had not reached the play-offs for twenty-one years prior to his arrival. Burtch took teams to the postseason three times in his first four years as head coach, averaging fifteen wins per season. In his chapter “Fundamentals: Coaching Today’s High School Player,” Burtch, also a history teacher at the school, looks at how today’s players have changed, as well as changes in the coaching profession itself.

Providing an insider look at what it is to be a high school coach in the twenty-first century, he reveals, “the job of today’s coach is to find things that are important in terms of team discipline and stick with these, while reinforcing them on a regular basis.” He came to this realization after comparing his players with those he played with in high school and college and understanding that times had definitely changed. Unlike prior generations who routinely followed a coach’s every command, today’s players do not follow their coaches without question. Burtch’s essay also includes an interesting look at teenage grief, because when tragedy repeatedly struck the small town, the players and their coaches relied on one another to accept and overcome their pain.

In “Seventeen Things I Learned from Dean Smith,” North Carolina fanatic (and native) Peter Cashwell explores the life lessons he learned from legendary University of North Carolina coach Dean Smith. Cashwell literally had a front row seat as Dean Smith coached the Tar Heels to two national championships, while emphasizing enduring values such as teamwork, adaptability, and fairness. “There are obviously many lessons I’ve drawn from watching Coach Smith’s

teams play,” Cashwell says, “But none is more important than this: Play the game to the end.”

Cashwell’s engaging chapter proves that our childhood fascination with sports and athletics can serve as a productive foundation for the rest of our lives. Role models such as Dean Smith show us how to shape our lives, regardless of the career choices we make. Cashwell allows us to join him as he relives his boyhood memories—a litany of jumpshots and dramatic victories—awash in a backdrop of Carolina blue.

The autobiographical chapter “Socks, Jocks, and Two Championship Rings,” by Michael Buchert, takes us inside the University of Florida Gators men’s basketball team during two Southeastern Conference (SEC) Championship seasons, including the miraculous run to the NCAA Final Four in 2000. Buchert’s unique perspective comes not from the usual suspects—the coach, one of the starting five, or even a local journalist—but from one of the real insiders at the heart of every big-time basketball program, the student manager corps.

Buchert, a self-proclaimed “NCAA jockwasher,” introduces the reader to his screwy cast of fellow managers, Coach Billy Donovan, and the many athletes who led the Gators to SEC titles, including current NBA stars such as flashy point guard Jason Williams and dead-eye shooter Mike Miller. Buchert shares the tension, inside jokes, pranks, mishaps, and sheer joy of belonging to a basketball family.

Writer Renada Rutmanis looks at the influx of foreign talent making its mark on the American game in the chapter, “Foreign Players and the Globalization of Basketball.” She links the NBA’s successful global marketing efforts in the 1980s to foreign stars dreaming of NBA superstardom. Although some observers initially fretted about the quality of the foreign players, stars such as two-time MVP Tim Duncan and Dallas Mavericks sharpshooter Dirk Nowitzki rank among the best of their generation.

Rutmanis recalls her experience living in Central America as the Chicago Bulls looked to wrap up the 1998 NBA Championship and views this event as a defining moment in the globalization of the sport. “When I listened to that Bulls play-off game in Guatemala, the language of the announcers may have been Spanish,” she says. “But clearly the language and the game of basketball had become universal.”

THE PROFESSIONAL GAME

Although this book distinguishes itself from most by focusing on basketball from the blacktops to the dazzling lights of the NBA, no work would be complete without a look at the professional game.

Historically, baseball has dominated the imagination of writers and fans, probably because it evokes such nostalgia. The “national pastime” induces our romantic notions of the past and its traditions. As a result, books about the history of baseball probably (conservatively) outnumber those on basketball 50 to 1.

Despite the bookshelves dedicated to baseball, however, basketball has had a much greater impact on modern society. I would bet that a person could not make it through a single day in any decent-sized American city and not see numerous examples of basketball’s effect on popular culture, whether it is baggy shorts, a player’s image hawking soda, or streetball fashions that have gone mainstream. The greatest stage for hoopsters turned pop culture stars is the NBA.

In the first chapter in this section, historian Jim Fisher asks us to “imagine a player who possessed Michael Jordan’s leaping ability, Julius Erving’s grace and body control, Charles Barkley’s strength, Larry Bird’s court savvy, and Wilt Chamberlain’s ability to dominate a game.” That player being described is the legendary Elgin Baylor, who Fisher feels “has received little credit over the years for doing things that no one had done before. His style of play routinely bewildered his opponents, but most commentators then and now have not credited him with changing the way basketball was played.”

In many respects, Fisher rescues Baylor from history’s dustbin. Most modern fans only know Baylor as a front-office executive for the long-suffering Los Angeles Clippers. Even many students of the game have little understanding of Baylor’s status as the player who transformed modern basketball. By bringing Baylor back to the forefront, Fisher is one of the first writers to recognize the player for all that he gave the game. Baylor, Fisher says, “Single-handedly changed the way that professional basketball was played. A game that was once slow (and often unabashed thuggery), transformed into a game of beauty. Where once method and strength were premiums, athleticism and free-flowing style dominated the game.”

We begin our analysis of the evolution of the NBA with *Basketball Digest* “Digits” columnist David Friedman in “Chocolate Thunder

and Short Shorts: The NBA in the 1970s.” Displaying his deft statistical analysis with precision equaling a George “Iceman” Gervin finger-roll, Friedman examines the league’s battle with the American Basketball Association (ABA) for hoops supremacy and the wacky personalities that fueled the game back in the disco era. According to Friedman, “The NBA and the ABA fought to sign players, to attract fans, and to win court cases that would change the shape of sports (not just basketball) forever. . . . Pro basketball was promoted as the ‘Sport of the Seventies.’”

Perhaps more than at any other time in its history, the professional game mirrored society in the 1970s. The game revolved around its star athletes, but at the same time the NBA was becoming more of an entertainment spectacle. Big money and big contracts for players and the television networks caused the league to become more litigious. On the dark side, violence and drug use were pervasive and threatened the moral fabric of the sport, just as recreational drug use increased across the nation. Friedman rightly labels the 1970s “a dizzying roller-coaster ride.”

Writer Lisa Ennis looks at the professional women’s game in her chapter, “Crashing the Boards: The WNBA and the Evolution of an Image.” Ennis traces the fate of several early women’s professional leagues, and then turns her attention to the development of the WNBA, the most successful woman’s league in history.

Included in her evaluation is the role the USA Basketball organization (USAB) played in marketing the 1996 women’s Dream Team. “By leaving gender out of the name and the uniforms, the USAB created an atmosphere of credibility never before experienced by women’s basketball,” Ennis explains. “This spirit of credibility spread, resulting in renewed life for the women’s game. The 1996 team went on to win gold and was wildly popular; each of the team’s six games attracted over 30,000 spectators.”

The future of the WNBA, as Ennis reveals, is still up in the air. Although the women’s game is more popular than at any other time in recent history, there is still trouble getting a women’s professional league on solid ground. Ennis’ chapter will provide readers with insight into the state of the WNBA and uncover the issues that still challenge the young league.

The late Michigan State University Professor and sports historian Lawrence Ziewacz chronicles the rebirth of the NBA at the hands of a

new cast of superstars in “Dr. J, Bird, Magic, Jordan, and the Detroit Bad Boys: The NBA in the 1980s.” Ziewacz deftly shows how the NBA changed in the decade, not only with its newfound emphasis on a few star players and franchises, but transformations in the game itself, from the introduction of the three-point shot to the demise of center-oriented offenses.

Ziewacz, co-author of *The Games They Played: Sports in American History, 1865-1980*, traces the rise of the Magic Johnson/Larry Bird rivalry in college and its impact on the professional game, then explains how the rise of the “Bad Boy” Detroit Pistons and Chicago Bulls fits into the development of the NBA in the 1980s. Ziewacz argues that one of the enduring legacies of the game from that period is the intensity of the competition.

Award-winning writer and editor Doug Fox of the *Daily Herald* in Provo, Utah, appraises the professional game in “The Jordan Era: The NBA in the 1990s.” As the paper’s beat writer covering the Utah Jazz, Fox had a front-row seat during the team’s two trips to the NBA Championship, each resulting in a loss to Jordan and the Bulls. Just imagine the pure joy of covering two of the game’s greatest superstars on a daily basis (John Stockton and Karl Malone), and then witnessing the magic of the back-to-back NBA Championship runs against the Bulls—arguably the two most exciting in the Bulls’ string of six league crowns. Fox’s chapter is an oral history of the 1990s, delivered in the words of those who made the decade so great, from Michael Jordan and John Stockton to Jerry Sloan and Phil Jackson.

Fox teases the reader and all hoops junkies by recalling Jordan’s winning shot at the buzzer in 1998, writing, “while most of the world relies on videotape and replays to relive that special moment in time—I can simply close my eyes, queue up my memory, and capture the greatness time and time again from my own personal perspective.” Fox not only takes us inside the life of a sports fanatic and writer, but his insightful examination of the league in the 1990s will be a joy to anyone who wants to relive the magic of the Jordan era. (Note: Utah fans may want to skip this chapter, even though it is from one of their own—the memories may simply be too painful.)

In “King James: LeBron James, Hype, Hope, and the Future of the NBA,” Batchelor tackles the budding legend of LeBron James, the most celebrated prep star in the history of basketball. The young man who is supposed to be the game’s next messiah is poised to begin his

NBA career with the Cleveland Cavaliers, while the league searches for a new talent to replace Michael Jordan in the fans' eyes. Batchelor examines what is in store for the young star and searches for answers to questions about how James will handle life in the NBA by looking at the way he dealt with fame during his amateur career.

According to Batchelor, the stakes are high for James and the league. "The NBA needs LeBron James to live up to the hype and the hope," he writes. "The future does not necessarily hang in the balance, but finding another Jordan to showcase could revitalize the game for another generation." For basketball purists, however, the hope is that James will be given the time to develop into the best player he can be and that we can all enjoy the skills he brings to the court. The fans in Cleveland would certainly trade an NBA Championship for all the James Nike shoes ever sold.

We hope you enjoy reading *Basketball in America* as much as we enjoyed writing it. Our hope is that this book will help spark an outpouring of serious writing on the game and its place within the fabric of American society. There is much more to the game than expressed by the literature that now dominates the field—countless cheesy memoirs and hastily written biographies. Basketball has been ignored for too long.

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PART I:
BASKETBALL IN AMERICAN
CULTURE

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Chapter 2

Michael Jordan: Icon

Bob Batchelor

I think he's God disguised as Michael Jordan. He is the most awesome player in the NBA.

Larry Bird (1986)

Sometimes I dream/ That he is me/ You've got to see that's how
I dream to be/ I dream I move, I dream I groove/ Like Mike/ If I
could be like Mike/ Like Mike/ Oh, if I could be like Mike.

Gatorade jingle (1991)

For many years in the 1980s and 1990s, Chicago Bulls public-address announcer Ray Clay yelled the most thrilling words in sports—and he never even got to finish his sentence. “And now, from North Carolina . . .” The mere thought of the darkened arena, laser-generated flashing logos, popping camera bulbs, and the familiar instrumental theme song competing for time with the screams of 25,000 fans brings chills.

After the hoopla, more like a rock concert than basketball game, Michael Jordan appeared in the familiar red and black warm-ups—blood red. The scoreboard, towering above in the rafters, glittered as all cameras focused on the Bulls star. The moment was quintessential Jordan—the smile, the smooth-shaved head, and the eyes . . . the intensity betraying the thousand-watt grin, like he knew what was going to happen for the next forty-eight minutes, like he could see into the future.

Put down the remote. You must watch. Tonight may well be extraordinary—MJ could post a cool 50 or hit the game-winner at the

buzzer. The very notion of Jordan drew you in. Just by watching, you could be part of history. You are witnessing real-life greatness.

For so many hoops fans and former basketball players, Michael Jordan is at the center of their most vivid memories. Many people around the world have a simple belief—Jordan *is* basketball. Over the course of his magnificent career, MJ has transcended the game, becoming an American (then global) hero and true icon.

Jordan's rise as a popular culture icon is particularly impressive given the quantity of media venues that pull the average fan's attention in a million different directions each day. The competition among entertainers for airtime is as fierce in the commercial and media realm as it is for many of them on the field or the casting couch. Jordan became a megastar in a world full of second-rate and third-tier celebrities who were recognized for little more than being famous, thus diluting the notion of what greatness and fame really is.

According to historian Walter LaFeber, who examined Jordan's role in spreading capitalism on a global scale, television and the post-1970s media enabled messages to extend far beyond national borders. "Culture could move with nearly the speed of sound and reach billions of people, not just the privileged," he explained. "Jordan and Nike (and McDonald's and Disney), suddenly enjoyed the power to reach vast audiences with an efficiency unimagined several generations earlier. Jordan's corporate sponsors chose the outlets where he would be featured. Is it any surprise that they decided on certain markets that targeted sports fans (ESPN) and young, affluent buyers (MTV)?¹

Why have fans followed, obsessed, and idolized MJ for what has now been decades? Jordan is the real thing. His magnificence on the basketball court has been undeniable, as is his legendary drive to outwork, outplay, and completely dominate the opposition. The celebrated stories about his work ethic played an important role in Jordan's folklore, enabling him to present an everyman face to the public, despite the fact that he was a millionaire as soon as the ink dried on his first professional contract.

In my own mind, the events unfold as I run through a catalog of MJ virtuoso performances. I remember watching in utter horror as a skinny, practically unknown freshman hit the game-winner against my beloved Georgetown Hoyas. That shot, so pivotal in MJ's career as motivational tool and confidence-builder, turned me into a be-