

Michael Jeffery Jordan '86

Each week the Chicago Bulls professional basketball team receives letters from parents of terminally ill children. Each child's dream is to meet Michael Jordan. And at almost every Bulls home game, one of those children sits on the team bench beside Michael Jordan, takes home a pair of his sneakers, and for an unforgettable moment shares the joy that he brings to the game.

As this year's professional basketball season wound down, National Public Radio told that story. The radio editorial remembered Babe Ruth as a hero for a nation slipping into depression and Muhammad Ali as a hero for a generation maturing in the civil rights movement. We are fortunate in our complex and troubled times, NPR said, to have Michael Jordan, a hero of that magnitude. It was an editorial of gratitude.

Game winner in Carolina's 1982 national championship season, college player of the year the next two seasons, National Basketball Association rookie of the year in 1985, and the NBA's most valuable player in 1988. Michael has joined Will Chamberlain in becoming the only professional basketball players ever to score 3,000 points in a single season, and the only ones to score 60 or more points in a single game on four different occasions.

These are the accomplishments that have allowed Michael Jordan to become a celebrity, but they alone could not have made him a hero. That required a spark of humanity, a compassion that touches the kids on the Bulls bench through Michael's personal attention, that comforts parents of hospitalized youngsters through his work with the Ronald McDonald House in Chapel Hill, that good-naturedly reminds North Carolina school students to buckle their seat belts. And any parents who have watched their child watch Michael's "Don't Do Drugs" ad have felt a shiver of gratitude.

It is a humanity that encompasses humility. As a tenth-grader in Wilmington, he failed to make the varsity basketball team, but he persevered. Years later, *The Daily Tar Heel* told the story of a diligent Woollen Gym official who, checking IDs of all the young men playing pick-up basketball, would not let new alumnus Michael Jordan play anymore. "He could buy Woollen Gym," one amazed witness recalled, "but all he said was 'Well, maybe next time.'"

It is a humanity that encompasses patience. At every step, he is in demand, for autographs, for a smile, just to be close. The crowds are dense and always there. "I have to pick and choose the times I actually go out in public," he told the *News and Observer*. "Some days I'm not the jovial, smiling person that people usually see." That's when he does not want to disappoint a young boy with a torn sheet of paper to be autographed or a grown fan with one more word of adulation to share. "You hate to say no," he says.

It is a humanity that encompasses common sense. "You can't come to college to play basketball," he told *The Daily Tar Heel* in 1981 as a freshman. "Basketball is just something that you do in your leisure time." He earned his bachelor's degree in cultural geography a year after beginning his professional basketball career, already a millionaire several times over.

And it is a humanity that encompasses a contagious joy. Michael Jordan loves to play basketball and the world loves to watch him. We knew it first here at Carolina. "I owe them a lot," he once said of the people of UNC, "because of the education...and the opportunity given to me to excel in my career. How I can repay that, I don't know."

He already has, in joy.