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Chapter Author(s): CHARLES BARKLEY

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CHARLES BARKLEY

The Role Model for the Non-Role Models.

Greatness: ★★★★★

Toughness: ★★★★★

Eccentricity: ★★★★★

Legacy: ★★★

WHEN AMERICA NEEDED an anti-hero most, Philadelphia provided one of the best.

In the late 1980s, advertisers squeezed the last drops of innocence and honesty from sports mythmaking, stripping the consumerism bare and transforming great players into corporate logos. The sneaker and sport drink companies took Michael Jordan, who was an outstanding player and non-execrable human, buffed away all faults and hints of genuine personality, and created a commercialized god: Hercules on the half-court, with moves that kill and sneakers worth dying for. It was all about the shoes. You were told that you wanted to be like him, and Mars Blackmon called him “Money,” in case you didn’t know what made the world go around.

Jordan was breathtaking to watch but impossible to escape: out-sized hero to kids, model champion for adults, Manna from spokesman heaven falling like rain on Madison Avenue. After a few years of the Jordan jackhammer pummeling our skulls, we longed for something else: the anti-Jordan. Someone not so shiny and perfect. Someone willing to say “I am not a role model.”

Admittedly, Charles Barkley’s “role model” commercial was just a clever bit of counter-merchandising. But Barkley said those words long before he sold them to Nike. Barkley wrote that advertising copy himself, and he meant it, defended it, and lived it.

He cut through all of that Jordan treacle like sharp acid. Or like saliva.

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IN LIFE, IT'S WHAT you do *after* you spit on the little girl that really matters. Barkley spat on 8-year-old Lauren Rose in the fourth quarter of a loss to the Nets in March 1991. Barkley claimed at the time that he was spitting at the floor, riled by a heckler who called him "every name in the book." Later, he said he was aiming for the heckler but didn't "get enough foam" and delivered the saliva equivalent of an air ball, one that rained down on a child.

The television tape shows Barkley spitting downward, as if aiming at the feet of his tormentor. It also shows the likely heckler, a wobbly drunk flexing his muscles, a guy who had no qualms about shouting racial slurs in front of children. It clearly shows that Barkley didn't "spit into the crowd," as nearly every news outlet reported. It was a disgusting gesture, but it was also sensationalized.

Now, imagine a carefully handled "role model" athlete like Mike trying to save his image after an incident like that. You can see it now: a tearful press conference, wife and children at his side. A sit-down with Oprah. Maybe some evasion: it was a sneeze, a seizure, an allergy attack gone wrong. No matter what, a Jordan type would never utter the phrase "not enough foam."

We know how media "show apologies" go, and how falsely they ring, which is why we hate them. That wasn't Barkley's style. Barkley was already in trouble over a tasteless joke about beating his wife after a loss: he said it, and America acted like he did it. He had been warned several times by commissioner David Stern and league vice president Rod Thorn about his on-court demeanor. The NBA and the media moralists were cracking down on everything from on-court obscenities to irreverent sound bites. Barkley was in the crosshairs, just for being himself, before he spat. Afterward, he was at risk of becoming some symbol of all that's wrong with society.

So he said his apologies, admitted his guilt, served his suspension, and paid his fine. But when Pat Riley interviewed Barkley for NBC, America saw something other than a made-for-television penitent. "I snapped at somebody," Barkley said. "It's not like I killed somebody or

beat him to a pulp.” Riley lobbed a softball to Barkley, asking if a fan who pays \$75 “deserves that kind of abuse.” Barkley sounded ready to back down but suddenly shifted gears. “Well, they pay the money, they can do whatever they want to. . . . No, that’s not right, that’s not fair to me as a person.” Barkley contended that the drunken fan should have been removed, that he had a right to not be barraged with curse words. He criticized the NBA for tacitly condoning the actions of drunks, just because they bought tickets. Then, he delivered an early draft of his “not a role model” speech. “I have an ability to run and dunk a basketball. There are a million guys who can run and dunk basketballs who are in jail.”

No self-flagellation. No spin control. Just straight talk, defiant honesty.

Of course, Barkley really was sorry. “I can tell how he feels, because he’s not making any jokes about it,” trainer Tony Harris said. “He really feels bad.” Who wouldn’t be sorry? But why make a public spectacle of it? Barkley turned the spitting incident right back on us. He admitted he made a mistake, then he asked us to admit to ours: growling and cursing in the stands, overreacting to minor infractions, rewarding image above substance, and making secular gods and surrogate parents out of slam-dunk specialists.

After saying his piece, Barkley bought season tickets for Lauren Rose’s family and took some time to get to know her. He sometimes did a lousy job of not being a role model.

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THE PROBLEM WITH casting yourself as the foil is that you’re doomed to never win. Barkley should have helped the Sixers to a title before Jordan’s emergence, but the timing was never right. As a rookie, he teamed with Doc, Moses, Little Mo, Andrew Toney, Bobby Jones, and the whole gang, winning 58 games but losing in the Eastern Conference Finals. That may have been the greatest team ever to miss the NBA Finals and the most squandered of all the squandered opportunities in this book.

One by one, the classic Sixers faded away. Toney’s feet gave out, and the Sixers offense devolved into a Malone-Barkley tug-of-war. Harold Katz decided Malone was too expensive, and Barkley became the team’s leading scorer, but replacing Moses with Tim McCormick had

a predictable effect on the standings. Erving and Cheeks faded little by little, and suddenly Roy Hinson and David Wingate were playing major roles, and the Sixers were out of the playoffs. Barkley grew as the superstars receded, from a lumpy rookie with a one-dimensional game to a multifaceted low-post weapon, hustling rebounder, and clever instigator. But the Sixers eroded faster than Barkley improved. Finally, the team started building around Barkley, trading Cheeks for Johnny Dawkins, drafting Hersey Hawkins, and acquiring Rick Mahorn.

It wasn't a bad supporting cast. Hawkins was the sniper who kept defenders from collapsing on Barkley. Dawkins was a solid point guard, younger and quicker than the mid-80s Cheeks. Mahorn was a defensive thumper and surrogate center. Mike Gminski, the actual center, was a mediocre player but a good system fit: he worked the perimeter on offense, ceding the low post to Barkley, and nailed every free throw. If ever there was a team custom-built to lose to Jordan's Bulls in the playoffs, this was it.

Jordan's Bulls beat Barkley's Sixers twice in the playoffs, winning both series four games to one. They weren't epic battles; Bulls fans might not remember them. The Bulls had tremendous size advantage underneath; Bill Cartwright and Horace Grant were too strong for Gminski but too tall for Barkley. Scottie Pippen directed traffic and clamped down on defense. Jordan drove and dunked, or drove and dished, or drove and drew fouls that forced the Sixers to go to their nearly empty bench. It was systematic disassembly, though Barkley did all he could, muscling rebounds from men 6 inches taller than he was, passing when double teamed, trying to deny history with just his anger and will.

The Barkley heyday was brief. Three playoff runs, two losses to Jordan, and the Sixers spun into decline. Manute Bol and Armen Gilliam replaced Gminski and Mahorn, making the frontcourt a sideshow: an elongated curiosity, a man with the power to magically disappear on defense, and a frustrated wild man who cursed, spat, threw elbows, and picked fights. The Sixers quickly became unwatchable: Bol flailing as point guards drove and dunked on him, Gilliam scoring 18 points with the team down by 20, Charles Shackleford lumbering around for 20 useless minutes per night. Barkley was as frustrated as the fans. He demanded a trade in 1992, and by then it was easy to imagine a better life without Barkley tirades and Barkley headaches. So the Sixers

traded Barkley for Jeff Hornacek, Andrew Lang, and Tim Perry, quiet guys with quiet games. And we didn't have to worry about spitting incidents, off-color jokes, or 30-win seasons for the rest of the decade.

Barkley remained Jordan's foil after he left Philly, battling him in the NBA Finals with the Phoenix Suns in 1993. Their friendly rivalry faded but never really died. Barkley still takes his shots at Jordan, criticizing everything from Jordan's efforts as a general manager to his moustache. Barkley is now more a court jester than an archenemy, but court jesters often land harsher blows than archenemies. Retirement has been far kinder to Barkley than Jordan, whose gold-embossed exterior started cracking under the weight of endless comeback attempts, self-serving Hall of Fame speeches, and ceaseless huckstering. Barkley was always cracked, so he can shrug off gambling scandals and drunk-driving arrests, give rambling interviews, and dabble in politics without tarnishing some carefully trademarked "image."

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I BUMPED INTO Barkley while covering Donovan McNabb's return to Philly. Barkley was walking through the crowd in the Wells Fargo Center parking lot wearing a Redskins McNabb jersey. He wore the jersey partly as a publicity stunt (Howard Eskin won a bet with him) but partly out of support. "I'm a friend of McNabb's, and I wanted to show him respect," Barkley said of his jersey choice. "I've been an Eagles fan for a long time, but I'm a Redskins fan today."

It was an amazing scene. Some fans rushed to hug Barkley or take pictures. Others shouted and waved. No one mentioned the jersey, spitting, bar fights, trade demands, or anything else that marked Barkley's tenure in Philly. Most fans just smiled and acknowledged him, the Hall of Famer in the parking lot, an old friend who showed up for the tailgate party, past sins forgiven.

No player ever held up a mirror to the sports world like Barkley, who threw hypocrisy back into the face of those who manufactured saints to sell overpriced sneakers. Only he could exist within the system and comment on it like an outsider at the same time. Only he could make not being a role model admirable. When he walked among the tailgaters at that Eagles game, he became a mirror of us as fans: a reminder that anger is fleeting, that the snarling fan and the devoted friend are often the same person.

Being the anti-Jordan wasn't about being a villain. It was about being human and being honest, relatable, and real. That's all Philly asks of her heroes: if you can't win a championship, you can at least look us in the eye. We may still be mad at you for a while, but not mad enough to generate much foam.