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# Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made

*By David Halberstam*



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From **The Breaks of the Game** to **Summer of '49**, David Halberstam has brought the perspective of a great historian, the inside knowledge of a dogged sportswriter, and the love of a fan to bear on some of the most mythic players and teams in the annals of American sport. With Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls he has given himself his greatest challenge and produced his greatest triumph. In **Playing for Keeps**, David Halberstam takes the first full measure of Michael Jordan's epic career, one of the great American stories of our time. A narrative of astonishing power and human drama, brimming with revealing anecdotes and penetrating insights, the book chronicles the forces in Jordan's life that have shaped him into history's greatest basketball player and the larger forces that have converged to make him the most famous living human being in the world.



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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

One of the finest nonfiction writers in any lineup, Halberstam likes to alternate what he's deemed his serious work--books like *The Best and the Brightest*, *The Fifties*, and *The Children*--with his sporting interludes, though in his hands, sports are much, much more than fun and games. Books like *The Breaks of the Game* and *October 1964* use sports as a prism. Culture, race, society, and history are all filtered through it, and Halberstam refocuses--and interprets--what comes out the other side.

That he would now turn his considerable abilities to exploring Michael Jordan is not surprising. Halberstam loves hoops, and Jordan not only defines the game, he defines an era. His fame crosses international borders as easily as he dribbles past half-court lines. In focusing on Jordan--as athlete and force of nature--and his osmosis from a young hoop dreamer to product pitchman to the world, Halberstam is really examining intangibles like myth and legend, celebrity and fame, wealth and image, excellence and genius, race and style, the qualities of heroism and the pursuit of perfection. "That there had been even one Michael Jordan seemed in retrospect something of a genetic fluke," he writes, "and the idea that anyone would arrive in so short a span of time and do what he did both on and off the court seemed highly unlikely." But the phenomenon that is Jordan did just that.

Understanding, even admiring, what he did, how he did it, and what it means in a basketball context and a larger one is Halberstam's goal, and, despite Jordan's lack of cooperation--or maybe because of it--Halberstam's muscular prose and thinking scores powerfully. Yet, there is a wistfulness, in the end, to *Playing for Keeps*; the game doesn't seem as much fun and collegial as it used to for Halberstam, and Jordan, great as he may be, emerges with less of the historic grace exhibited by Jackie Robinson, Ali, and Arthur Ashe than with a quality that Halberstam deems the athlete-explorer "in terms of going beyond previously accepted limits of what was humanly possible, and somehow by dint of physical excellence and unmatched willpower, pushing those limits forward that much more." Dazzling, certainly, but not necessarily heroic. *Playing for Keeps* is also available on audiocassette. --Jeff Silverman

#### From Publishers Weekly

Halberstam (*The Children*, etc.) has written an excellent book about the game of basketball and its greatest player. Readers familiar with Halberstam's customary insight into American life might think he pulls some punches. But this is an engrossing portrait?much edgier than the ballplayer's own current bestseller, *For the Love of the Game*. This is an examination of Jordan as athlete and media phenomenon, of the superstar's professional life and also of the NBA's coming of age. The focus is squarely on Jordan's astounding competitiveness and will power, qualities that, Halberstam argues, have as much or more to do with Jordan's success than even his remarkable talent. Meandering back and forth through time, Halberstam covers everything from the invention of ESPN to the genius of Spike Lee's Nike commercials?and every major playoff game Jordan played. With equal enthusiasm, Halberstam profiles the supporting cast: Bulls' coach Phil Jackson, whose job was to "maximize Jordan's abilities, without letting him suck the oxygen away from his teammates"; agent David Falk, who created "the idea of the individual player as a commercial superstar"; teammate Scottie Pippen. The book is filled with salty, informed hoops talk. It does not, however, give readers an intimate look at Jordan, who declined the author's request for an interview. Nor does Halberstam pursue difficult questions about Jordan's character, about the way he has decided to use (or not use) his celebrity and his wealth.

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From Library Journal

This is more a biography of basketball than of Michael Jordan. There is very little insight into Jordan offered by him or his family, which leaves the book a bit flat early on. However, with quite a lot of observations from his fans, teammates, and associates concerning his motivation, the quality of his play, his strength, athletic grace, winning smile, and unprecedented ability to appeal to the imaginations of folks from all facets of American society, the ex-NBA star and cultural icon comes through quite well. Halberstam (The Fifties), a fan himself, has made this a real treasure for basketball fans in spite of Jordan's nonparticipation. The book is a study of the rise of the NBA, of agents, media and marketing, and it has the inside line on Jordan and the Chicago Bulls' six championships. Well read by Richard M. Davidson, this is highly recommended for general collections. ACliff Glaviano, Bowling Green State Univ. Libs., OH  
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#### **Olive Wilson:**

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