

0. Pre-read for context.

1. Close read the text for understanding.

2. Perform one of the five analytical reading tasks.

3. Write a one-page reflection, connecting this article to your own experiences, reading, or observations.

## **How Michael Jordan and The Last Dance Spoke to a Nation Desperately Missing Sports** by Sean Gregory, Time.com, May 18, 2020

Over these past few weeks, *The Last Dance*—the ESPN docuseries about Michael Jordan and the 1990s Chicago Bulls—has offered pundits much-needed talking points for a world mostly devoid of actual sports. Episodes that covered the blood feud between the Bulls and Detroit Pistons, and recalled the time that star Pistons point guard Isaiah Thomas and his teammates walked off the court without shaking their opponents' hands (before losing the 1991 Eastern Conference Finals to Chicago) sparked a debate about sportsmanship.

Two weeks ago, the series examined Jordan's lack of political engagement; he famously refused to endorse an African-American candidate running for U.S. Senate seat held by conservative Republican Jesse Helms, whose career was marked by repeated charges that he was racist. Does Jordan deserve a pass for passing? Last week, episode 7 of the ten-part series dealt with Jordan's berating of his teammates, sparking considerable discussion about leadership: Can you get the best out of your co-workers without being a jerk? (The consensus: yes).

Sunday night's highly anticipated *The Last Dance* finale, however, didn't give as much grist for chatter beyond sports. The final installment was a basketball film, and a fine one at that. The last two episodes walk the viewer through Chicago's under-appreciated 1998 Eastern Conference Finals series against the Indiana Pacers, coached by Larry Bird, which went to seven games. The Pacers put quite a scare in Chicago, almost ending Jordan's final season in Chicago prematurely.

We also get a behind-the-scenes look at Chicago's back-to-back NBA Finals victories over the Utah Jazz, a hard-nosed team led by power forward Karl "The Mailman" Malone and assist-king John Stockton, in 1997 and '98. The film delves into the biography of reserve Chicago guard Steve Kerr. Usually, a three-point specialist playing about 20 minutes per game wouldn't require a chunk of time dedicated to his backstory. But Kerr has a heck of a backstory; his father, Malcolm Kerr, was assassinated while serving as president of American University in Beirut in 1984, Kerr's freshman season at the University of Arizona. Kerr also hit the shot that clinched the 1997 title for Chicago. And, he's current head coach of the Golden State Warriors. Keying on Kerr helps the film connect with younger fans, for whom Steph Curry's Warriors, not Jordan's Bulls, might be their formative team.

The finale didn't drop any bombshells. Though I, for one, either didn't realize, or didn't remember, that Dennis Rodman blew off a practice during the 1998 Finals to appear at a professional wrestling event with Hulk Hogan in Detroit. Rodman's girlfriend at the time, Carmen Electra, made another appearance in the documentary to talk about Rodman's "detour," and offers another opportunity to imagine the holy hell that would unfold on social media if a current NBA All-Star skipped town during the Finals to appear on WWE Raw.

Jordan's personal trainer, Tim Grover, was on hand to float a conspiracy theory sure to be deconstructed in the coming days: He claimed in *The Last Dance* that the night before Jordan's famous "Flu Game," in which he scored 38 points in Game 5 of the 1997 Finals after spending the day throwing up in bed, that five guys showed up to deliver Jordan a late-night pizza in Utah. Something seemed fishy; the flu, according to this telling, was actually food poisoning from a rotten pizza, possibly spiked by a bunch of delivery guys/Jazz fans.

Hmmm; the story seems a little too convenient. If Jordan's entourage was so concerned about the circumstances surrounding the delivery, why would they let Jordan eat it? Then again, it's extremely difficult to keep a hungry man away from his late-night pizza.

Like last week, when we see Jordan tearing up while explaining why, in his mind, he had to push teammates in order to win, the documentary goes a long way towards humanizing an athlete that didn't appear all that human while dominating his game. *The Last Dance*, whose executive producers include two of Jordan's business managers, explored Jordan's relationship with Gus Lett, a former Chicago police officer who worked in Jordan's security detail. After Jordan's father was murdered in 1993, Jordan leaned on older men like Lett for guidance: Jordan would call Lett in the middle of the night, distraught about his father's death, and Lett would drive to Jordan's home to console him.

During the last dance season of 1998, Lett battled lung cancer and received chemotherapy treatments: Lett's wife says it was Jordan who alerted her that something was amiss with her husband's health. Jordan gave Lett the game ball from the Game 7 win over the Pacers in '98; Lett died in November of 2000.

*The Last Dance* makes clear that while Jordan does have a sweet side, he won't let some grudges go. The series ends by wondering what could have been had the Bulls not broken up after the 1998 season. Jordan's clearly still irked that the Bulls went into rebuilding mode rather than try to bring key players back for one more shot at another championship. "It's maddening because I felt like we could have won seven, I really believe that," Jordan says in the film. "We may not have, but man, just not to be able to try, that's something that I just can't accept."

Some revisionist history is at play here: The odds of Scottie Pippen, for example, returning to the Bulls at a discount when he was underpaid for years seems far-fetched. Pippen is an all-time NBA great, but forever in Michael Jordan's shadow, even in this film; *The Last Dance* is ostensibly about the Bulls, but mostly about Jordan. The final episodes skipped over one of Pippen's finest moments in a Bulls uniform: in Game 1 of the '97 Finals, which took place on Sunday, June 1, Pippen whispered six words to "The Mailman" Malone, who had an opportunity to give Utah a late lead with a pair of free throws. "The Mailman doesn't deliver on Sundays," Pippen told him as he stepped to the line. Malone, after hearing one of the more artful bits of trash talk in NBA history, missed both foul shots. Jordan then hit the game-winner at the buzzer. (That part, naturally, was in the series).

Near the end, the series does grapple with the broader legacy of Jordan and the Bulls, and calls on a former president of the United States—and longtime Bulls fans—to put things in perspective. "There are great players who don't have an impact beyond their sport," says Barack Obama. "And then there are certain sports figures who become a larger cultural force. Michael Jordan helped to create a different way in which people thought about the African-American athlete. A different way in which people saw athletics as part of the entertainment business. He became an extraordinary ambassador, not just for basketball, but for the United States overseas as part of the American culture sweeping the globe. Michael Jordan and the Bulls changed the culture."

*The Last Dance* arrived in a singular moment, when the watching of a nostalgic piece of art became a shared ritual, out of necessity: with the NBA playoffs still suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, reliving the 1990s, for basketball fans, is better than no basketball at all. But there was something disheartening about seeing the series, for a fifth straight Sunday, being covered like a major sporting event during the 11 p.m. *Sportscenter* that followed each pair of episodes. Or knowing that ABC will dedicate a full hour of its prime-time broadcast block on Tuesday evening to air an "After the Dance" special hosted by Stephen A. Smith. The program promises to give viewers an "inside look" at the series, and NBA players will talk about their takeaways from the show.

This speaks to something more than just ESPN's typical excessive promotion of its programs. The fact is, people are still so desperate for sports distractions that they'll not only watch a documentary serving as a stand-in for live sports. They'll watch a "making-of" special about the documentary serving as a stand-in for live sports.

*The Last Dance* delivered on its promise to keep audiences engaged and entertained. But I so look forward to the day where we no longer need a *Last Dance*.