

AN ANALYSIS OF SOME BASKETBALL GREATS

This paper will be analogous to the previous paper on Sylvester Stallone. Namely, expositing upon the psychological factors which were responsible for establishing their success within a designated field. However, before concepts of this nature can be appropriately addressed, it would be most judicious to define certain elements of professional basketball for the sake of those who are oblivious to the nuances of the game.

The three point line- A line which is at a considerable distance from the basket. If a player scores a basket from *behind* this line, it is worth three points as opposed to the customary two.

The low post- The area which is reasonably close to the basket. The taller men on the respective team tend to generally score from this area.

The forward- As a general rule of thumb, he is one of among the taller players on the team. Due to his height, he generally tends to function in the capacity of scoring from the low post as he possesses the greatest ability to penetrate the defence and score at close range.

The guard- Generally speaking, these are men who are shorter than others on the team. Consequently, their ability to score from the low post is negated. However, they "compensate" via other abilities. Although there are various types of guards, the type of guard which is germane to this analysis is the point guard. He is responsible for handling the ball, and passing it to another player when that player is in a suitable position to score.

A triple double- There are five empirical areas by which players are gauged. They are: scoring, assists, steals, rebounds, and blocks. A triple double entails achieving double figures in three of these five areas during the course of a single game. An example would be one player scoring twenty points, twelve assists, and ten rebounds.

The hook shot- This is a particular type of shot one makes when one is striving to score. *Effectively* describing it in writing is rather intricate. Therefore, the only aspects of this shot which are germane to this analysis will be delineated. This is a very difficult shot to execute well. However, when it is properly executed, it is *inherently* challenging to defend against. The player executing it is *between* the defender and the ball. Consequently, you will experience extreme difficulties in either stealing the ball, or blocking it, *and* adhering to the rules of basketball. This is especially acute with a centre who is seven feet two inches tall. There are many N.B.A. players who simply claimed that *no* defence existed to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's hook shot.

When dealing with basketball greats of the contemporary era, are their respective styles of play random developments which they simply became comfortable with, or are their styles of play the result of psychological factors? An analysis of various players will reveal that there are anomalies in their styles of play (in relation to their physical characteristics). If the reader is prepared to give due consideration to these anomalies *without* cursorily dismissing them, the

anomalies will induce a reasonable basis for considering the existence of psychological factors in effect.

The primary anomaly pertains to the physical characteristics of certain players and their subsequent style of play. If one is of a certain height, then you will naturally "gravitate" towards a position and style of play which is commensurate with that height. Those who are six feet six inches (or shorter) are generally guards whereas those who are six feet nine inches are generally low post forwards. However, what if one not only gravitated towards a position that is outside of these parameters, but (*most importantly of all*) *excelled* at a style of play which was incommensurate with your physical characteristics? Three of the greats of the contemporary era fall within this category. Julius Erving (Dr.J) was six feet six inches, yet he was on the greatest low post forwards in the history of the game. Magic Johnson was six feet nine inches which would entail a natural gravitation towards a position of forward. Yet, he became a formidable point guard instead. Larry Bird, at six feet nine inches did perform as a forward. However, instead of excelling via low post scoring, his forte was to score from the three point line. As previously stated, it is not merely anomalous for them to play via these styles of play. The greater anomaly manifested itself by them *excelling* at these respective styles of play.

Another anomaly can be found via Michael Jordan's comments some time between game one and game two of the 1992 finals. In the first game, he played outside of his normal style by successfully scoring from the three point line. Even if one is completely ignorant about the dynamics of basketball, it is a self evident fact that if you are capable of *reliably* scoring from the three point line, this is a superior shot than the standard two point basket. Yet, in some of his comments he expressed a degree of opposition to making three point shots. He stated that it detracted from his game. What possible reason could there be for expressing opposition to making a three point shot instead of a two point shot? What exactly did he mean when he stated that it detracted from "his game"?

Their styles of play were induced by psychological factors which they experienced during the course of their lives. These factors were extrapolated (on an unconscious level) to their styles of play. Even though their styles were incommensurate with their physical characteristics, it was an unconscious mechanism which prevailed and imbued them with their respective styles, even at the "cost" of playing in a manner which did not suit them physically. It was also this factor which caused Michael Jordan to express some degree of opposition to his successful three point shooting. Detracting from his game entailed playing in a manner which was lacking parity with a particular unconscious influence.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar- His hook shot was one of the best executed (if not *the* best executed) in the history of the game. Was the development of his hook shot merely a random development which arose *arbitrarily*? An examination of his life would present an alternative explanation.

Kareem experienced racism during the course of his life. When an individual is victimized by racism, there could potentially be a myriad of different types of reactions. Some may obsequiously bow down and do nothing. Others will fight back in one respect or another. Kareem was in the latter category. Regardless of the magnitude of opposition he faced over his skin colour, he refused to be overwhelmed by it. On the contrary, he developed an even deeper identity with his black heritage. He was not born Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, but rather Lew Alcindor. However, as an adult he converted from Catholicism, to Islam and changed his name

to a Muslim name. Regardless of the magnitude of opposition he faced, *you would not take away his pride in his black heritage, or negate his pride in being black*. This became an *integral and critical* component of his mentality. Was it possible, in one respect or another, to "extrapolate" this ideal to his style of basketball play?* Via the hook shot, yes. Once Kareem obtained the ball and appropriate position, the defender was not going to prevent him from scoring. You would not steal the ball, otherwise you would foul (hit) him and be called for it. You would not block it as it was already coming down on its arc by the time it was released from his hands (to block it at this stage violates the rules of basketball). In the same way that intense opposition would not prevent him from taking pride in his black heritage, opposition would not prevent him from scoring *regardless* of the nature of the defence as this is the *inherent* nature of a well executed hook shot.

Although this was the psychological factor which imbued Kareem with his style of play, physical attributes are not to be disregarded. This is emphasized for a specific reason. There are many Jews who would be in a similar position to Kareem. Regardless of the magnitude of anti-Semitism they experience, they take tremendous pride in their Judaic heritage. *However*, how many seven foot two (physically) well developed Jews are there? Therefore, it was an initial natural aptitude (predicated upon intrinsic physical attributes) which *initially* caused Kareem to excel at basketball. However, it was a *psychological* factor which imbued him with the requisite abilities to truly excel at the game in such a manner as to considerably surpass his contemporaries on the court.

Magic Johnson- Magic Johnson is one of the greatest (again, if not *the* greatest) play makers in the history of the game. No matter where you are on the court, he possesses an uncanny ability to find you and get the ball to you (make the assist) once you're open. At times, it seemed as if he could play blind folded and still make the assist. From where was this ability derived?

Prior to proceeding with the analysis, it would be appropriate to argue a particular point for readers who are knowledgeable about the N.B.A. John Stockton is seemingly just as proficient as Magic in relation to making the assist. However, there are clear distinctions between the two. Stockton is proficient at making the assist. Magic's abilities *transcend* mere proficiency. His abilities are *instinctive* and almost artistic (the no-look pass). Seemingly, without even making an effort, he possesses the capability to spot the open man and make the assist. The same cannot be said of Stockton. Although he does his job very well, there is no manifestation of instinctiveness, as there is with Magic.

The psychological analysis is as follows. Somewhere during the course of Magic's life (either early childhood or his teenage years), something was either stated to him, or something transpired to him which caused him to develop a lack of confidence in himself. This lack of confidence became an integral part of his psychological makeup. At some stage, this influence was "extrapolated" to his style of basketball. Instead of playing the critical role of scoring in order to win the game, he would rely on others to score. On an unconscious level, he lacked the confidence to make the big play himself. Consequently, there was the veritable "quest" for others on his team to make the big play themselves. This entails *perpetually* seeking the open man and being fully cognizant of the movement of his team mates. Even when he peripherally "glimpsed" an open man, he would rather pass him the ball then take the shot himself. Whenever Magic was on the court, this was his style of play.

* Extrapolate is in quotes as we are dealing with an unconscious mechanism, *not* a conscious choice.

Readers who are knowledgeable about the N.B.A. may feel that there are a few flaws in this theory. If Magic was lacking confidence, this should have clearly manifested itself. Yet Magic was *teeming* with confidence. Therefore, this theory must be erroneous. This is not an anomaly for the following reason. This lack of confidence *imbued* Magic with the ability to play basketball at the level that he did. He *knew* that he was a great basketball player. Consequently, since this psychological influence rendered Magic a great player, he experienced tremendous self confidence as a *direct result* of his playing abilities. However, let's assume that Magic was devoid of the requisite physical characteristics to *initially* create some natural aptitude for basketball. If these circumstances had prevailed and he had taken up to a common job, then a paucity of self confidence *would* have manifested itself.

There is some evidence to suggest that on an unconscious level, Magic is lacking a certain degree of confidence in himself. Magic consistently plays via "Magic's rules." What this entails is as follows. When he does proceed with a shot himself at the basket, if it doesn't go in, he insists that he was fouled. During one of his comeback attempts, the following transpired during the course of a game. He drove towards the basket with a defender in front of him, but the shot didn't go in. Clearly the defender did not touch Magic at all. When the shot missed, he stared at the referee and *screamed*, "Come on!" (call the foul). He then moved rapidly towards the referee and made unnecessary physical contact while confronting him. He was promptly ejected from the game. Subsequently, he was suspended for three games and fined \$10,000 (no unnecessary physical contact will be tolerated, *especially* when it's directed towards the referees). Although this is the most extreme example of the "Magic rules", make no mistake about it, when he does take the shot, if the ball doesn't go in, all too often he *insists* that he was fouled.

How do the "Magic rules" provide any indication that Magic is lacking self confidence on an unconscious level? When he misses, *he is implementing projection*.^{*} As any psychiatrist or psychoanalyst should know, whenever any type of defence mechanism is implemented, it is an attempt to distort the reality of the world. Furthermore, on an unconscious level, it is *known* that there is a distortion of the world as it is, and that the reality of the situation is starkly different from what one would wish it to be. In other words, the player who knows that he possesses the requisite abilities to successfully make shots will accept responsibility for making a mistake when he misses the shot (even if it is a completely open shot with no defenders present). However, an individual who experiences self doubt about his abilities to successfully make shots, will not accept responsibility for his mistakes. Instead, he will implement some type of defence mechanism, just like Magic implements projection when he misses.

The reader who possesses some knowledge about the N.B.A. may be cognizant of another anomaly in this analysis of Magic. This analysis would imply that Magic would, for all intensive purposes, be fundamentally incapable of playing a critical role in scoring. If this were the case, how could one explain the three point basket he made during the 1987 finals (via a hook shot) which won the game in the final seconds of the game? More importantly, what about his spectacular performance in game six of the 1980 finals in which he scored forty two points? This analysis does not preclude the possibility of Magic scoring under any and all circumstances. *If the circumstances justify it*, he will score, and score well. If the circumstances justify it, he *must* function in this capacity as he is one of the best players on the team. In 1987, the Lakers were behind and Magic couldn't find an open man. Consequently, he took the shot. In 1980, Kareem was injured and rendered incapable of playing in game six. Since Magic was a team

^{*} This is a psychiatric term which the interested lay reader will have to find the meaning to in a psychiatric text.

leader, he knew it fell to him to carry the team on his shoulders (although in retrospect, one shouldn't disregard Jamaal Wilkes' outstanding thirty seven point contribution in the achievement of that victory). In light of the fact that this was the reality of the situation, Magic "stepped up to the plate" and carried the day. A simplistic analysis of Magic dictates that a psychological factor imbued him with a playing style which consistently caused him to rely on others for the purpose of scoring. However, a more in depth analysis dictates that on the rare occasions when the individual circumstances demanded it, this psychological factor did not render him incapable of scoring. On the contrary, if it was imperative that he score, he would engage successfully as he was a team leader. Furthermore, a lack of confidence (on an unconscious level) does not render one incapable of scoring.

Larry Bird- In his day, Bird was the most successful three point shooter in the game. The following analysis would have to be confirmed with Bird as I merely heard him say this on television during the course of an interview. When he was in school, he was told that the abilities he exhibited there would not extend to the university level of basketball as this was an entirely different level of play. When he played in university, he found that he still excelled at the game at a level which exceeded the playing ability of his peers. However, he was still told that in the N.B.A. he would not prevail since that was a new level of play. Another element which *may* have been a contributing factor in others consistently telling him that he wouldn't make it, was the fact that he was white (although I did *not* hear this from any media source). Within the N.B.A., very few white players succeed. To put all of this into succinct terms, Bird was consistently told that his aspirations of becoming a successful basketball player constituted "a long shot". Although Bird may have understood this to be a reality, he was also supremely confident that he *would successfully* achieve this "long shot". If this influence (others telling him that it's a "long shot" and his belief that he would make this "long shot") adopted some degree of importance in his mentality, then this would explain why he became the most formidable three point shooter in his day.

The reader may feel that there is a significant flaw in this theory. Once Bird became successful in the N.B.A., it was no longer a question of his success constituting a "long shot". Consequently, his style would not have been comprised of engaging in the three point shot. The reader must recognize that in Bird's case the psychological influence outlined *initially imbued* him with his style of play. Once he encountered success with it, it simply *became* his style. There would not have been a need for the maintenance of this particular influence in order to perpetuate his style of play. This similar type of situation would have prevailed with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Even though a time came when he was no longer subjected to racism, the hook shot simply *became* his style of play, regardless of whether he was actually *experiencing* racism or not.

Julius Erving- Erving was one of the greatest "slam-dunk" players ever. He would rise above the basket, and slam the ball into the hoop with conviction. My hypothesis to explain this style of play is as follows. At some early stage in his life (either childhood or his early teens) he developed the belief that whenever he was confronted by a problem, he should not obsequiously bow down to it. He must *rise above* the problem and *overcome* it. If a concept of this nature became a part of his psychological development, it would have been extrapolated to his style of basketball.

Procuring evidence to substantiate this would be inordinately complex. Thus far, there is only the fact that a relatively "short" (that is, short for the N.B.A.) player would play in this manner. It is inordinately anomalous for a six foot six player to become such a proficient "slam dunk" player. However, substantial evidentiary support for this theory would have to be derived from Julius Erving himself. For him to identify the adoption of a belief of this nature from some period in his life could not be accomplished in "three seconds or less". The most profound behaviour may have been induced by the most *subtle* (and seemingly) inconsequential influence. Although I have no intention of blindly and stupidly defending my theories (if I'm wrong then I'm wrong), at the same time for Erving to recall a (seemingly) trivial event would prove to be a formidable task indeed.

Michael Jordan- Jordan's style was to drive (run) towards the basket and score by "bypassing" his opponent. His speed simply enabled him to "circumvent" all opponents. This analysis will have correlating factors with my analysis of Julius Erving. At an early stage in Jordan's life, he too realized that he must not be overcome by adversity. However, instead of rising above his problems and overcoming them, he developed a belief in *getting around* his problems. Like Erving, if this had become a component of his psychological development, it would have been extrapolated to his style of play. However, unlike Erving, there is an additional factor to outline in this analysis of Jordan. His speed played a critical role in his success as a player. Although I have not witnessed any video of his basketball performance in university, I can only presume that this sense of speed was lacking at university. The basis of this statement is that in the 1984 draft, he was *not* selected first overall. He was selected third. Consequently, the remarkable skill which manifested itself in the N.B.A. seemingly did not prevail when he played at the university level. An explanation for his speed once he commenced play in the N.B.A. would be as follows. Upon entering the N.B.A., he knew that this would be drastically different from playing at the university level as it would entail a new echelon of play. Although it probably would not have been a conscious decision on his part, he simply elevated his overall style of play via a significant enhancement of his speed.

Procuring evidence for the support of this theory is no different than the situation which prevails with Erving. The evidence will have to be derived from Jordan himself. Again, for Jordan to identify (what may be) a *seemingly* inconsequential influence, would prove to be a formidable task.

Although this, in essence, suffices to elucidate upon why these individuals attained their stature, one other factor must be incorporated into this analysis. These players were not merely highly proficient in relation to their scoring capabilities (or in Magic's case, play making). They were highly proficient in other facets of the game. Magic Johnson holds the career life time record for triple doubles. For a substantial period of time, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar held the life time career record for the most blocked shots. The others also excelled in other elements by which a player is gauged. Although I have been unable to formulate a complete explanation for the acquisition of these abilities, I have conjectured a rudimentary hypothesis. It was a psychological influence which was (predominantly) responsible for their style of play. Once their game on the court reached a high state of proficiency, they automatically developed "a mind" for the game thereby enabling them to successfully engage in other components of the game. The other elements that they excelled at were commensurate with their physical

characteristics (Jordan would steal, whereas Bird would rebound). In other words, if one becomes *highly successful* in one component of a designated field, you will then possess the ability to successfully engage in the other components of the field which may be necessary to ensure your success. This situation prevailed with Houdini. When he performed as an escape artist, he was viewed as the second greatest showman of all time. In principle, showmanship and his capabilities as an escape artist should have been independent of each other. To be specific, when he performed exclusively as a magician, he should have been capable of extrapolating his remarkable capabilities as a showman to his magic. However, this did not seem to be the case. Despite his *technical proficiency* as a magician, he was consistently viewed as a mediocre magician as he was incapable of extrapolating his showmanship capabilities as an escape artist to his performance as a magician.

Some readers may feel that there have been some glaring omissions in this paper. Namely, Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Jerry West, Elgin Baylor, Bob Cousy, John Havlicek, and perhaps, the first star of the N.B.A., George Mikan. These individuals were before my time and, with the exception of Chamberlain, I know nothing about them. Furthermore, I am oblivious as to what style of play manifested itself on the court. Without this information, an analysis is rendered impossible.

Conclusions

The factors which caused these individuals to attain the level of success that they attained within basketball are as follows.

1. The requisite physical capabilities to induce some degree of natural aptitude for basketball.
2. A psychological factor which imbued them with a particular playing style when it was "extrapolated" to their game. (This was the *most crucial* factor in explaining their success.)
3. The acquisition of the ability to successfully engage in other facets of the game to ensure their overall success. This "acquisition" was rendered possible via their development of a "mind" for basketball as a result of the psychological factor imbuing them with a designated playing style.